

Call Me Tabs: The Making and Breaking of a Marine Corps Wife

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Introduction: A Story of Our Own

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books, you shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, you shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

-- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself", *Leaves of Grass*

Throughout history, our literary heritage has been fascinated with the narrative of the soldier – the man who will stand up for what he believes in, the man with courage, the man who will fight with his brothers – the man, the man, the man. The roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to Ancient Greece with the story of Homer's *Iliad* (800 B.C.), the story of how countrymen, and brothers, will stand together and fight for a common goal. Even Shakespeare's Histories are loaded with soldiers and war. This kind of story has manifested itself in other ways throughout history as well: stories of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, King Arthur and his Knights of the Roundtable, and stories from Greece like that of the Spartans. But all these stories lead to one simple fact – they are about a man and his brothers. These are masculine stories of the protectors of the country and home front, protectors of women and children.

Modern day narratives reflect those from ancient times. The story of the soldier has not gone by the wayside for a moment, probably because there have always been wars or the memories of wars since man first walked on the earth. The story *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien show a group of soldiers during Vietnam and talks intimately about their friendships and the things they carried with them, making their

possessions a window into who they are within this mantle of “soldier.” Nonfiction narratives like *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young* (1992) and *Black Hawk Down* (1999) have told the personal stories of soldiers through their own eyes -- through the authors’ personal experiences in Vietnam and Somalia. These stories reflect how the soldiers interact in the military setting, away from loved ones. They draw in those around them to create their own sense of family and community, willing to die for the man to their right or their left.

These books have also found their way onto the movie screen. Cinema has been showing war and the soldier since the medium’s inception. Movies like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *The Flying Leathernecks* (1951) were two John Wayne movies that focused on Marines -- movies depicting heroes saving the day. In 1987, Stanley Kubrick decided to change that image by telling the story of Vietnam and the Marines who served there in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. It is a classic in its genre, a psychological exploration into the darker side of what a person goes through being torn down as an individual and rebuilt as a Marine.

Once again, it all goes back to the human fascination with the story of the soldier and his brothers. The movie *Jarhead* (2005) has a scene where a new Marine is “jumped” in by his brothers. They tie him to his rack and pretend to brand him. He passes out. When he wakes up, he sees that he doesn’t have a brand. The one salty Marine still left in the room tells him, “You have to earn a brand. Welcome to the suck.” This image demonstrates what we are not usually able to see. It is a peek inside the group, a

personal side of how these soldiers function behind closed doors. It is the peek that we want to see; men being men, hazing, the coming of age bravery test that are so common through civilizations from the Native American bravery tests to the more docile coming of age rituals like the Bar Mitzvah. They are demonstrated in our society not only through the military, but also through gangs, fraternities, and sports teams. It is nearly always the same group – young men, ages 18-25.

Why does society find that story so satisfying? We are shocked by the stories of hazing in fraternities, the stories of bullies picking on weaker kids. Why is it OK in the context of the military? Is it because we want the men who serve our country and protect us to be strong and savage? We want our soldiers to piss camouflage and bleed red, white and blue. It makes us sleep better at night. We are under this blanket of protection of a band of brothers who care about nothing except the man on either side of them. They are keeping watch tonight, so we need not be afraid.

When my ex-husband made the rank of E-4, which is a Lance Corporal, he was “pinned” by the guys in his squadron. They stood in a circle and took turns pounding the pins of his chevrons into his collarbone. If he yelped and made any noise, they pounded harder. It made him one of them. It inducted him into their family.

But, my husband had a family of his own. He had a wife and two kids. Several of the men in that room were married with children as well. Where is their story? There is hardly ever a narrative about what happens when the men come home from war. Where is the story of the Marine that teaches his son how to throw a football? Better

yet, where is the story about the wife that has to teach her son to throw a football because his father is deployed? These stories have been almost non-existent to our culture. It puts a human face on these men. They are no longer the nameless, faceless, expendable men on the front lines, putting their lives on the line to protect us. When you give them families, they become someone's son, someone's husband, and someone's father. It gives them a life outside of the military, and that isn't marketable to the conscience of the public. These military men didn't need families, other than the ones that they served with. As a matter of fact, having a family may be seen as a liability, taking their minds off their job at hand. If they have nothing to lose, they have nothing to distract them.

There is another part missing to this puzzle. While the story of the soldier has always been told, the story of the wife waiting for him back home has been left out of history almost completely. There are stories from Ancient Greece like *The Odyssey* (800 B.C.) that illustrates the pains a man will take to make it home to his wife and child after war. There is also the story of *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.) by Aristophanes, which demonstrates how women will band together to bring their men home from war. Aside from these narratives, there is little to no mention of the wives and children of the soldier throughout history or literature. Even when you get to cinema, the family element is left out completely. That is, until the movie *We were Soldiers* (2002). It is the first popular movie, to my knowledge, that not only shows what is going on with the men at war, but also what is going on with the woman at home. It shows that the

women also band together, forming their own family units while their family is overseas. But, the main part of the story is still that of the soldier. The wife is still in the background, with only a few scenes in between the stimulating war action sequences. It is almost a way to wind us down a bit through the movie, like the lull in the rollercoaster before the next big drop; the exposition that drives the narrative forward, giving us motivation to keep watching and learning about these individuals and their lives. It humanizes the characters in camouflage.

While the good, supportive wives shown in *We were Soldiers* give one depiction of this culture, the other side of that are the depictions of the cheating wives like a scene in *Jarhead*. A woman sent her husband a copy of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and the VHS ends up having a recording of her having sex with their neighbor. What a narrative about the wives at home, right? Here is a question: If your spouse was deployed right now and you wouldn't see them for two years, how hard would it be stay faithful? I can't pass judgment; I refuse to. I strive to break these stereotypes. There is more to a Marine wife than the whore and the housewife. Not all wives are brave in the face of despair, and not all wives are out at the bar as soon as the deployment ships out. The truth is housed somewhere in the middle. I think the public is ready to hear these stories now. I want to induct a national understanding of this way of life. The majority of these people are young (at 22, I was the oldest wife on my entire street in base housing), they are vulnerable, and they make mistakes. They also have the strength to manage their lives alone; it is a life they choose.

That truth evened out as women became more prevalent in the military setting, due in part to the violence against them after their husbands came home from war. Tanya Biank wrote her book *Army Wives* (2006) after reporting on the cases of soldiers returning from war and killing their wives. In mid-2002 over a period of six weeks in Fayetteville, NC, home of Fort Bragg, four soldiers were accused of killing their wives. Biank, along with other female writers, took this and other incidents as a cue. Military wives were just a side product of the soldier, never thought of at all until something bad happened to them. Biank decided to write a book surrounding the lives of four separate wives in very different situations. This book would become the inspiration for the Lifetime Channel's hit show *Army Wives* (2007-2011), which is in its fifth season. This show depicts the military in every way, good and bad. Some of the show is glamorized for television. There are four women who are friends; two are officers' wives and two are the wives of enlisted soldiers. In reality, the majority of women have to wear their husband's rank on their proverbial sleeve, keeping the "right" company (officers with officers, enlisted with enlisted) to help their husband's career advancement. Other subjects ring true and do not paint a glamorous picture – adultery, death of a spouse, dangers while the spouses are away (i.e. home intrusions, etc.), abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, and even surrogate motherhood to supplement income.

While civilian women can watch *Army Wives* and appreciate it, those of us that have lived that life realize how true and tragic it can really be – having no say in where

you live, never being able to make a friend that is around for more than six months to a year, and not being able to look forward to family holidays, birthdays, vacations, etc, are just some of the things that these women deal with on a day to day basis. These small comforts that civilian women attach to their normal lives are special occasions to military wives. A civilian wife gets angry if her husband doesn't call if he is going to be late. A military wife knows that if her husband doesn't call, it may be because he can't call – he may be on an op (operation), he may have been called away early for a deployment, or 100 other reasons. A military wife may go 3-6 months or longer without ever hearing her husband's voice, and depending on the deployment, she could go a year without ever seeing his face. When you think about what military wives are up against, being late for dinner or having to cancel the family trip to Florida doesn't seem quite as important.

This memoir comes at a defining moment in our nation's timeline. The United States is currently involved in wars in two separate countries, and deployment schedules are heavier than they have been since Vietnam. Culturally, we are watching people disappear from our everyday lives; those who serve in the National Guard as well as active duty. It makes this issue all the more pressing and important – this story needs to be told.

Ethnographical Significance

The cultural impact of being engaged in a “wartime society” since 2001 has taken its toll on individuals. Most of us (military or civilian) have seen footage of troops coming or going, we’ve heard the stories of loss, and we’ve seen the coffins, covered in the American flag, being rolled off the C-130s. To look inside these stories, to live as these women live, and go through their trial and tribulations is vital to understanding what military life is like for all sides. That is why a story like this is ripe for not only ethnography (researching a community from the inside) but also auto-ethnography (showing how living within that community changes the researcher). It seems like the perfect time to combine scholarly research and personal narrative to tell a real story. Margaret K. Willard-Taub talks about the combination of research and story in *Feminist Studies*, relating how relevant these narratives are to Anthropology and several other fields:

“Over the last fifteen years, in fields ranging from English studies to anthropology to law, approaches to writing that incorporate autobiography and personal narrative are being used by scholars not simply as means for meditating on lived experience but also as methods of scholarly analysis and argumentation. Such autobiographical, multivalent, and multi-“voiced” texts have attracted much critical attention within their fields, especially for their ideological challenge to traditional, disciplinary discourses that (some would argue) privilege certain kinds of knowledge – and certain writers and readers – over others.” (188)

The personal narrative contained within this thesis is relevant to the way ethnographical studies are being conducted today. The personal narrative helps to

challenge society – it gives way to weight to the facts cited from secondhand sources by giving a firsthand account of a situation.

Ethnography is a marriage of rhetoric and science under the common name “cultural anthropology.” By studying the language of different culture or community we can gain insight into a particular mindset. Kenneth Burke foretold the uniting of rhetoric and anthropology by saying, “We are not so much proposing to import anthropology into rhetoric as proposing that anthropologists recognize the factor of rhetoric in their own field.” I went inside this subculture and researched it as one of them, not as an outsider. That was inherent to the nature of the work. To lead them in any way, to be a journalist instead of a researcher, would have tainted my study. It would have made me an outsider – not “one of them.” I did not go into this looking for the story, my life contained the story. In “Evaluating Ethnography,” L. Richardson establishes five criteria to evaluate the ethnographic process and keep the ethnographer on the track of his/her story: Aesthetic Merit, Substantive Contribution, Reflexivity, Impact, and Expression of Reality (254). I believe my project meets all five criteria:

1. *Aesthetic Merit*: This piece is written in diary form. I believe this form succeeds aesthetically because it draws the reader into the real life situation, tapping into their voyeuristic side and showing them a peek through a usually closed window in society.
2. *Substantive Contribution*: This piece contributes to the understanding of social life because it shows a discourse community (Marine wives) that isn’t usually shown to the public – the good, bad and ugly.

3. *Reflexivity*: I lived among these women for 7 years of my life, as one of them, and researched for two weeks as an outsider in their society. I believe my point of view on their issues were self aware enough to make observations about their lives and judge the actions of the society.
4. *Impact*: I believe this piece will move people (civilian as well as military) intellectually and emotionally. It is a story that hits the high and low points of a marriage and a society, showing the range of human ability and emotion.
5. *Expression of Reality*: Being that there are different levels of good and bad brought into this piece, I feel that it is a slice of reality that many people in this community go through. I feel that it has a solid base in the realities of this group.

These were several techniques that I incorporated into the project. Along with video and photo journaling to document my trip, I also kept a written journal and audio recordings of all my interviews. Utilizing these different forms of media have helped me to remember some of my own experiences. They've aided me in building the scaffolding and framework for this narrative, knowing where to crowd the details and where to leap; where to show a scene and where to use exposition. Doing this helped to answer some important questions posed by Melinda Levin and Alicia Cruz in the *Journal of Film & Video*: "What is beyond 'cultural understanding'? What should we do once we 'understand' cultures? How does one utilize tradition, expectations, and tools to best engage different personal, political, and economic arenas?" (3) Ethnography, in my opinion, is about living within a society, documenting their ways of life, and maybe finding out a little about you along the way. Documenting these moments and really

getting to know these women help to create an understanding unlike any that has been made before.

Societal Influence

Society feels now, more than ever, a need to sympathize with the women they see on the news – the women waving goodbye to their loved ones for six months, a year, or maybe longer. With two wars going on across the globe and live streaming video from these places, the public longs to see what the news doesn't cover – the story of those at home. They want to go inside the base, inside the commissary and the PX. Through shows like *Army Wives*, and more and more books about the lives of military spouses, people who have never set foot on a military base are getting a backstage look into the lives of these spouses. Unfortunately, the majority of these views are fictitious. There are few military women who write about their lives – good or bad – in memoir form. Either they fictionalize their lives or they write about the good things. This is due to the fact that most of them are still involved in the military life. Their husbands are career military. How would it look for the “little woman” to publish a book about how horrible the Marine Corps really is when her husband is still serving? Hopefully that woman would make the bestseller list, because her husband's career would be over. So, the bad is squelched or sweetened, in varying degrees, and the good things are made to sound even better. There is not a domestic violence problem in the military; nerves just run high because of deployment schedules. There is no alcoholism in the military; alcohol on a daily basis relieves the tensions of a fierce training schedule. There is no

poverty in the military; base housing is efficient. It gives a family electricity, running water, and shelter from the elements. That is all a good soldier needs; that's all his family should need.

Spouses who wish to write about their experiences do have another option: they can write an instruction manual for new wives. I think this is a copout. It is the same watered down nonsense I spoke of before. There is one manual for Marine Corps Wives called *Roses and Thorns*. This is the book all Marine Corps Wives get when they go to their initiation training on their particular base. On the inside cover of this handbook is a piece of prose called "I Am a Marine Wife" by Pat Egan. While I won't spend time quoting the lengthy work in full, I will give you the general gist of it:

"I try to be familiar with his job..."

"I wait when long hours or tours of duty separate us..."

"I pray for his success in his career..."

"I hope that he fulfills his potential..."

"My husband has earned his right to be called 'Marine.' He has been tested and not found lacking. May I be found as worthy of the title 'Marine Wife.'"

This book, along with others like *Married to the Military* and *The Military Wives Handbook*, works to strip a woman of her identity. From the front of the book to the back, she is told that her first priority is to serve her husband. She doesn't matter anymore. It is not

about her career, her potential. It is about being the supportive wife to the man who is fighting for his country. Yes, this is noble, but at the same time, the book is not realistic. One can read on for hours about parties, teas, and other such nonsense. It makes being a Marine Corps Wife sound like one long social event with a few pesky deployments and moves between the parties. What it doesn't tell you is that all the parties and whatnot are geared toward upper level Staff NCOs and their wives (E-6 and above), a rank that most men will not see for at least 6-10 years (with the exception of officers of course). Most of the women that read this book will never be invited to a tea, and never need to know social protocol beyond how to behave at the yearly Marine Corps Ball. However, there are important things in this manual as well. There are tips about moving, deployments, and Marine Corps History. But, the day to day important things like "Does your base require a state inspection sticker for your car?" or "How to change a tire/fix the sink/mow the lawn" are not covered in this book. Also, the big question – How do I make sure my kids remember their daddy while he is gone for a year? – isn't addressed at all.

This handbook covers all the need to know information. It explains DEERS (Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System) and TRICARE (Military Health Insurance). But, as I stated previously, it leaves some things out. What this book doesn't tell you is that if you are living somewhere other than a military base, it is really tough to find a doctor who will accept your insurance. So, hopefully you don't need to take your child to a doctor when you are home visiting family. Otherwise you will

have mounds of paperwork and phone calls before you can get anything paid for. That is just one of many things the handbook doesn't tell a new spouse. It doesn't tell the spouse that her ID card is like gold, and heaven forbid she lose it while her husband is on deployment. It doesn't tell her that Wives Clubs in the area for young, enlisted women are either a place for hens to cluck or a place to find women who want to go out and party the second their husbands leave town. It doesn't tell her that if her husband hits her, calling the MPs does no good – they may not even report it. It doesn't tell her that while she may have a house on base, her husband will lose his BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing) and that amount may be more than the base house is actually worth: i.e. we were living on base and BAH was \$850 a month. We could have lived out in town in a nice 3 bedroom townhouse for \$650, paid \$150 for electric and had \$50 or more to spare. On top of that, we wouldn't have had the base regulation constraints, we wouldn't have had to worry about mowing the lawn every week (whether he was there or not and whether I was pregnant or not) and we wouldn't have had to show an ID just to go home every day.

These are some of the many reasons I feel it is time for a true look at life from the inside. Women in the past have shined up the Marine Corps Wife lifestyle. I am not looking to tarnish it. I am not looking to make Marines look like monsters or their wives look like submissive wet noodles. I feel this is the moment when people need to hear a real life account of the life behind the fence, the life inside the base – the good, the bad, and the really bad. This is my truth and the truth of others I have interviewed;

a story of how I saw those seven years of my life – 1999 to 2005 – and how they affected me and continue to affect me today.

Research and Analysis

All of the stories contained in the memoir portion of this piece are similar to those I heard during my 2008 research trip. I met these women. I sat in their dining rooms and on their couches while their kids ran around the house. We laughed, cried, and talked at length about what they were going through. Walking into an interview with one young 22 year old was like walking into my own past. Her house was the exact same layout as my old one. Her living room was arranged the same way and she had the same haggard appearance of a woman who was trying to raise two kids (18 months apart) while their daddy is overseas. She was who I once was – a woman trying desperately to hold on to her marriage and her sanity, while maintaining a perfect outward appearance when need be. She is the reason I am writing this thesis – they all are. I can't write about them with the same detail that I can write about my own experiences. But, through talking to them and comparing notes, I realized that my experiences are their experiences. This story could not be told from someone who has never lived the life, and this story could not be told by someone still living the life. This story has to be told by me.

When discussing community building practices among Marine Corps wives, the subjects I interviewed expressed consistent overlap in the following areas: attitudes about the Marine Corps lifestyle, hardships during deployments, living conditions and building friendships. These were the same stories I had heard time and again from my friends and the timeline I had experienced in my own marriage. Deployments were hard, living conditions were bad, and friendships didn't last long with the high turnover rate. But these women soldier on. They continue to get up every morning, even after saying goodbye to their closest friend and their husband in the same day.

The wives I interviewed spoke about the way they were regarded by the Marine Corps – second-class citizens. The Corps took away their husbands; it was their wife. These wives were forced to be the woman on the side, the mistress in their own marriage. Of the women I interviewed, not one contested the arrangement. Many even said, “I made a choice to marry into this life. I knew what I was getting into.” They were content to stay at home and support their husband's endeavors. Several commented that they didn't work so they could better serve their husband, marriage, and family. These women try to forge a family bond in a nontraditional sense, through entering Wives' Clubs or volunteering in the community. Some women with children join the PTA or volunteer at their child's school whenever they can. Adult contact is important to them, especially if they have small children and their husband is gone for a long period of time. During deployments, all a woman has is the community that

surrounds her. If she doesn't try to become a part of it, deployments are even more difficult to endure.

All the women interviewed agreed that deployments were the hardest part of being married to someone in the Marine Corps. There was one, who was a Marine herself, who disagreed about how wives should cope with the stress of deployments. She believed that women should just "get over it," and not dwell on the negative. Others believed that missing their spouse and not using the "get over it" mentality actually enhanced the level of commitment in their marriage. One question that was split down the middle was the question about whether or not to move "back home" during a deployment. Some women, especially those who are pregnant, make the choice to move back in with their parents during long deployments. This is most common among the youngest Marine wives. Wives who have been living with deployments for a while will choose to stay at their base and continue their lives as though their husband just left for work the previous morning. In choosing to stay, wives believe they are demonstrating their strength and commitment to the other wives and the community, while those who leave are sometimes regarded as outsiders for their desertion during the hard times. Continuity is important for the men who are gone and the women who are home. It is the opinion of some wives that I interviewed that "moving back and forth from hometown to base during each deployment can be costly, can uproot the family's housing situation, and may cause women to soften their commitments to their husbands." To sum it up, if a wife can't be committed to her new community, how

long will she stay committed to her Marine? While this is all based on opinion, it should be understood that opinions and perception are the only real truths that matter in a Marine Corps Wives community.

The majority of the women interviewed were the wives of Enlisted Marines (E1 through E5). Half of the women lived in base housing, while the others lived in various areas of Jacksonville, NC and surrounding areas. Those who lived on base thought the advantages were: not having to pay utilities, not having to worry about eviction and the safety of living on a military base. The main disadvantage was the substandard housing that was available. One young wife, Allison, told me about her experience on September 11, 2001, and how she wished she'd lived off base at the time:

The base was on lockdown – threat condition Delta. I left for work in the morning at 7am, dropped my kids off at the 'sitters house, and went about my day. We watched the tragedy unfold at work, and I started hearing buzzing around town that the base was closed. As I pulled up to the gate that night, I was told that no one was allowed in or out of the housing area, and I had wait 2 hours and beg to get clearance just so we could go home. My children were in the car, and my husband was deployed overseas. I really wished that we had a house out in town that day. (The Jacksonville Interviews)

For those living out in town, the advantages were: living in a nice place, extra money left over from their housing allowance, and not having to show an ID just to get to their home. The disadvantage was the lack of money that sometimes led to eviction. Another wife, Samantha, shared a story about almost losing her home, and the repercussions from the Marine Corps stepping in to save it:

We'd overspent on our budget for two months, and we really didn't have the money to pay our mortgage. I'll admit, we were young and dumb at the time, but we thought 'Hey, the Marine Corps will save us.' Little did we know that 'saving us' would mean less money in the long run. The Marine Corps did bail us out with financial assistance, but my husband had to face credit counseling and lost rank over the incident. (The Jacksonville Interviews)

This is a good demonstration of how the Marine Corps expects families to act. They expect Marines and their families to be able to handle their finances. If they do not, they can lose rank and pay, or possibly lose the chance of promotion. The Corps wants leadership and if a Marine can't handle his money (or how his family spends the money) then he obviously isn't leadership material in their eyes.

When asked about how they build and maintain friendships in an ever-changing environment, many interviewees referenced attending meetings with wives clubs. Though they acknowledged that this sometimes led to strong friendships, but they can sometimes lead to drama that the wife doesn't need. Sarah, a Marine wife for the last 11 years, talked with me about wives clubs and what she thinks of them and the women who join them:

I think spouse clubs are great in the idea. You are very isolated when you get to a new city, and they are one of the few publicized ways to get to know people and learn about your new lifestyle – this strange little bubble we live in. The women that join are those that are seeking that out. They are the joiners, the ones who step out of their comfort zones and have a tendency to do that. My take on wives clubs are that they are a good thing, but they do afford women the opportunity to become a little catty and gossipy. But, it was my saving grace. Those women became my family away from home. They are the one thing I will

remember about Jacksonville that was a positive – even though there was negative with it – it made me feel a sense of comfort and belonging; it was my community. (The Jacksonville Interviews)

These clubs do help foster friendships and community in a world where friends are hard to find. Only two wives I spoke with had bad experiences with these clubs or had negative feelings about them.

Aside from Wives Clubs supported by the USMC base, women find other ways to build friendships as well. One common method is to build a community surreptitiously, through hosting sales parties. For example, some women sell Pampered Chef, Avon, Longaberger, etc. as a means of making some extra money and meeting new people. Other women make ties with women in their neighborhood. All the women interviewed agreed that while friendships may be easy to start, they are harder to maintain. An entire neighborhood may change over in 6 months to a year, depending on deployments and transfers. Even though social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace make it easier to stay in touch across long distances, most of the wives I interviewed said that because of the daily duties of everyday life on the base, taking care of the kids, and husbands that are deployed, it is really hard to make time to stay current with friends that have moved on.

In addition to these four points, all the women agreed that one way to identify and separate them from the rest of society was to learn the military jargon that is common on base. Phrases like PX (department store), Commissary (grocery store), and C Store

(convenience store), along with thousands of other words and acronyms, are a means of finding people like themselves in a mixed society off base.

While emotions were split on whether or not being a Marine Corps wife was better or worse than being married to a civilian, most women agreed that after some time, they were able to get comfortable with their place in this discourse community, and several have expressed fear or anxiety over the idea of having to convert back to regular society once their husbands are honorably discharged or retire from service. This bubble protects these women, their way of life, and their morals and values from the criticism of the outside world. Once they are forced into the civilian world once more, what will they look like to every day “normal” people? I know how my own story ends – I was sent back to a world where adult children were the norm, and no one understood the idea of responsibility, least of all any of my peers. At 25 years old, I was the most mature person I knew, and after a while I reverted to my eighteen year old self...trying to start over and regain some of what I’d lost to the Corps.

Explanation of the Form

The memoir portion of this piece consists of three stories: the story of the young girl and newlywed, the story of the salty Marine Wife making a bad situation good, and the story of the woman leaving the Marine Corps life to return to the civilian world. At first, the diary entries are upbeat and written within a few days of each other. Then, as life starts to get harder, the entries space out over months. It is only toward the end of

the work, as the tension is growing, that the reader sees the entries shrink to only days or weeks apart. The woman in these stories used this diary when she was young, and picked it up again when she needed a confidant, someone to turn to in her time of emotional need.

The first is the story of Tabby, a girl in her late teens and early twenties who is a new wife and mother living in a strange place. Tabby is very attached to her parents. She clings to the morals that have been instilled in her since birth, and she doesn't want to give up her family or life that is now 700 miles away. She doesn't have many friends and spends all day at home with her infant son, Jason. Her husband Jeremy works long hours, and since they only have one car, Tabby spends most of her time inside the little row housing apartment at 2005 South Drive. Tabby is a naïve girl. She is overweight, and has been picked on most of her life. She clings to the people nearest to her, and they ultimately betray her trust. While she never thought her life would end up here, she is happy and oblivious, just trying to get by on \$1200 a month and love.

The second story is that of Tabitha, a woman who is learning how to be a "single" married woman with a husband in the Marine Corps. Her husband is gone a lot of on deployments, so she lives as a single woman, with (as the t-shirts like to say) "Half her heart in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc." Tabitha has grown up since moving away three years ago, and through her maturity, she has found a purpose in her life. She is now the mother of two and with her husband away, she realizes that she needs to forge a life of her own under the identity of "Marine Wife". She joins the Enlisted Wives

Club, makes friends, has lunch dates, and even starts to take a leadership position.

Tabitha is just starting to find her own way...a way that is not kosher with her husband who has become more controlling now that his wife is starting to find self esteem.

Tabitha's story is one of turmoil, abuse, and the struggle to find oneself...while hiding behind the façade of a perfect marriage.

Tabs, the third woman in our journey, is a woman dealing with the aftermath of a turbulent 7 years. She has recently found out that her husband is cheating on her, and has been for some time now. She has no schooling, no job, and she is 700 miles away from everyone that is important to her. While Tabs' story starts out as one of loss and sadness, it is also one of triumph...a woman who has become empowered. She is finding herself, having now cast off the mantle of "Marine Wife". She spends 6 months with a man who makes her realize that there are good men out there, and that only the bad ones hit and humiliate. Tabs' story looks like it will have a happy ending, until her husband comes home from deployment and insists on reconciliation. He loves her, he wants to start over. Tabs has to figure out if she is ready to morph back into one of her two former selves (Tabby or Tabitha), or if she wants to stand strong against the man who raised his hands to her and start her new life free of his abuse and anger.

All three of these women have different problems and insecurities – all of these women were me. But, they are not just me. They are also the women who live at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and Camp Pendleton, California. They are stories representing the women who move to these bases every day because they love a man who has put on

a uniform; a man they want to support. They are stories of women who are trying to pull together their communities and make families, because their real family is thousands of miles away. They are stories of women who are getting divorced because of abuse, infidelity, etc. and are forced out of a life they have known for years, the only grown up life they have ever known. I look through the photographs and listen to the interviews from my research trip, and I hear my memories. Even though I am six years separated from that life now, I remember what it was like through the aid of these wives and their honest interviews. I remember what it was like to be a bubbly happy Marine Corps wife, I remember picking up the mantle for appearances, and I remember laying it back down and driving away on Rt. 24. I never looked back, until the day I started writing my story.

In less than a decade, I went from being a naïve child who knew nothing of the world to a woman who knew more than she ever wanted to know. My morality changed. I saw the grey areas in abuse, poverty, and adultery. It wasn't abuse – it was tough love. It wasn't poverty – it was frugality. It wasn't adultery – it was getting what you needed when you needed it. The flowery, loving marriage that I had pictured – you know, a husband that comes home every night by six to have dinner with his family -- that's all I wanted. I wanted what I dreamed of as a little girl. I wanted what my parents had. I thought that love remained the same; once you got married and had kids, everything else would fall into place. No one in my family had ever been divorced. I didn't see it as an option. That was something other people did. So when I

heard “Tabby, I kissed that girl,” “Tabitha, I’m sorry I called you a bitch, but you made me so mad,” or “Tabs, I slept with her and we are in love,” I thought I should find a way to make things work. While I saw the grey areas in every other facet of life, I never saw the grey area in my vows: I said “For better or worse” and I meant it. I thought the better would come after the worst was over. I mean, what is the old cliché? It is always darkest before the dawn and every cloud has a silver lining. Well, after seven years of being pulled apart and put back together, my sky had a thick cloud with no lining and dawn was never coming. I was torn apart at age nineteen and stitched back together; a Marine Corps rag doll. When I started unstitching my seams, I saw the world as it was: not all women had to live like this, and neither did I.

My mother asked me once why I wanted to write this memoir. She said, “Why do you want to put all your memories, good and bad, out on a rummage table for people to pick through? Aren’t you afraid of what they will think?” My answer is simple: Everything I have done to this point has molded me into a woman who is not only able to live with her past, but is able to try it on and tell it to the world. I am not ashamed of the paths that I’ve taken; they have led me here. However, my journey is far from over; I need to get past this life and move on. In her book, *Remembered Rapture*, bell hooks stated this feeling best:

“To me, telling the story of my growing-up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone – out of my life forever – I could more easily become the me of me.” (80)

While I don't regret the things that I've done or the things done to me, it is time to lay that life to rest. It is time to "kill" Tabby and Tabitha; time to put down that mantle of burden for good.

The advantage of writing this thesis five to ten years after the fact is that I have maintained the space needed to write this memoir from a moderately unbiased point of view. I have had time to physically and mentally heal with time, and am still able to write intelligently about the lifestyle of the Marine Corps. The timeframe also keeps the experiences relevant to the time period being discussed. There are four distinct voices within this memoir. The first is the present day narrator, who appears in the introductions to each section and the footnotes. She is the one with the space to tell this story in the way it should be told. She is the most present version of me. The second is the voice that writes directly to the diary, having a conversation and conveying all the hopes, doubts and fears that go along with being a Marine Corps wife. The third voice is the first person narrator of the italicized scenes outside of the different diary entries. This voice transports the reader to past events and shows the details. The final voice is the voice of the artifacts; the emails, letters, cards and blog entries that were transcribed from actual documents. These give you the clearest picture into my mindset and bring in outside points of view from others connected with my life. While this is a nonfiction account, I admit that the following piece is ultimately my truth; my story. All the

stories are based on real events that took place in my life from 2000 to 2005 in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Some names have been changed, and some have not.

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Preface

"And I'm here to remind you of the mess you left when you went away. It's not fair to deny me of the cross I bear that you gave to me. You oughta know."

– Alanis Morissette, "You Oughta Know"

"I reversed my vasectomy, Tabitha," is where this story began. It was July 1, 2010 and I was on the phone with my ex-husband who had just informed me of his plans to have a baby with his new wife. This was the man who, in 2003, said "I don't want to have any more children." I didn't realize that he left out the words "with you."

"Good luck with that," I shuddered before hanging up the phone. *He took away my opportunity to have children, without as much as a 'Mother may I?' and then he gave it back to her!* Not knowing what else to do, I sat down and started to type.

Call me Tabs. Who am I? Not anyone in particular. The government calls me 2XX-XX-XXXX, my professors call me 4.0, my parents call me Black Sheep, but I prefer Tabs – it suits me. It is the one name that has fit me over the years; it is the role I understand. I've been a wife. That had disastrous results. I am a mother, but I'm still finding my way. So I just stick with Tabs.

A story begins when things change in one's life, so that's where I'm starting mine. It was a time when life wasn't all sugar coated roses – a time when a lie and a truth sounded the same to a woman who trusted without question or doubt.

Tabby

"The Good Wife"

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

-- William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1595

Shakespeare was right – love is blind. Well, it is when you are nineteen years old and a newlywed. That was me -- Tabby, a naïve girl from Marion, Ohio who didn't see beyond her handsome Marine husband, Jeremy.

Jeremy and I were married after only six months. He proposed two weeks after we'd started dating¹ in my mother's garage. He read my diary² and discovered that I wanted to marry him some day.³ Jeremy's proposal was less than poetic:

"Tabby, so many women have been horrible to me; so many of them have been bitches. Please don't be a bitch⁴ to me."

"Huh? Jeremy, what are you talking about?"

"Tabby, I love you. Please marry me. I want you to be with me always."

"What are you on? You're joking right?"

¹ Yes...I said "two weeks".

² What's an invasion of privacy matter when love is on the line?

³ I was young and swoony, give me a break!

⁴ I always wanted a proposal containing the word "bitch".

That was the extent of it. My mom called for us to get in the van, so I left him without an answer. It was the Fourth of July, and we were going to the Marion County Fair.⁵ After a few rides and some cotton candy, we stood beside the grandstand at the fairgrounds and watched the fireworks. Right after the first huge red and gold explosion started to flicker out, Jeremy dropped down on one knee, in front of my parents, sisters, and three quarters of Marion.

"Tabby, please marry me. I don't want to live the rest of my life without you."

"What?! " My mom turned to me. "Are you pregnant?"⁶

"Of course not Mother!"⁷ I turned back to Jeremy. Are you sure about this? Why me?"

"Because you're it for me Tabby. There'll never be anyone else. Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will, you idiot," I answered, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

Jeremy put his arms around me and whispered, "But, I'm your idiot."

Oh, young love...how fleeting it can be.

Two months later, we found out that I was pregnant. A month after that he left for Boot Camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. I never saw that romantic, idealistic man again.

⁵ Everyone goes to the fireworks on July 4th...what else is there to do in Marion?

⁶ A sensible question, in my opinion.

⁷ Contrary to popular belief, some teens decide to get married without being pregnant first.

He sent word on July 2, 2010, that he'd found us an apartment, and he wanted me to move to Jacksonville, North Carolina to be with him. So, I packed up my Dodge Neon⁸ with my clothes, books, and my son and headed to Jacksonville.

August 2, 1999

Dear Diary,

I can't believe it! We're finally in North Carolina. Jennifer and I drove all day in the Neon with Jason in the back seat. I thought I would be exhausted when I got here, but once I saw Jeremy, all that fell away.

When we pulled up to 2005 South Drive,⁹ I thought my heart was going to pound out of my chest. I was so nervous. Jeremy came out of the house and scooped me up in his arms. God...I always feel so safe with his arms around me.

I want to go to the pay phone¹⁰ and call Momma. I feel bad about the way we left things this morning:

"Tabby, you're upsetting your mother," Dad said as he helped me load the rest of my books in the car.

⁸ This was the most affordable car at the time. My uncle called our Neon a "throwaway car". I never told him that the horn went out in the first six months and we didn't have air conditioning for two Carolina summers.

⁹ 2005 South Drive was old base housing. It was no longer used by the base, so the row housing was dilapidated. We basically lived in the poor side of town...in a town where almost everyone was poor.

¹⁰ We didn't have a home phone for the first two weeks we lived in Jacksonville, and even then...long distance was expensive. This was 1999 B.C. (Before Cell Phones...at least for us).

"Dad, I love you guys, but Jeremy's my husband, and Jason is his son. I know that you both love little Jay, but it is time for us to be a family."

"Sweetie, I understand that. But, look at Mom. She hasn't even come out of the bedroom this morning. You should at least go and talk to her."

I closed the trunk of the Neon and looked back at the house. "No, Dad. Saying goodbye now would be too much."

I feel bad, Diary, but what am I supposed to do? Mom isn't being realistic.¹¹ She thinks I should stay with her and Dad forever just because I gave birth to their only grandchild. She needs to have a little faith. Jeremy loves me. We will be fine.

Love,

Tabby

August 22, 1999

Dear Diary,

Well, this place wasn't so bad at first -- a one bedroom apartment with a manageable kitchen, decent bedroom, and hardwood floors. But, at second look...

¹¹ My mother is rarely realistic about her grandchildren. The day I left, she wrote a letter to Jason about how much she missed him, and a letter to me telling me how much I broke her heart leaving. They are both still in my Winnie the Pooh baby book.

cockroach city! This place makes the movie *Joe's Apartment*¹² look sanitary! Ok, maybe it's not *that* bad, but it's pretty bad.

My first encounter with one of these pests happened last night. It was as long as my hand and flying. I came out of the bathroom after taking a shower and something buzzed my forehead. I let out a yelp, and ducked behind a chair. I'd never seen a roach in my life, and I had no idea they could get that big! Once it landed on the ground across the room, I threw my husband's size thirteen Nike sandal on top of it. I thought the problem was taken care of, but much to my surprise the sandal began moving across the floor. I thought, *Shit! Now the thing is armed!* At that point, I ran across the room, jumped and landed hard on top of the sandal. The roach crushed, I lost my balance, and the sandal flew out from under me. I ended up with the remnants of mega roach's carcass all over me, and it was back in the shower.

This place is disgusting. Jeremy told me that even if we spray, the roaches will come back because they will just move to another apartment until the air cleared. So, I am stuck living with the roaches. I want to go home, but I can't, because this is home now.

Love,

Tabby

¹² Have you ever seen *Joe's Apartment*? I recommend it. Cockroaches that sing and dance are not nearly as creepy. Maybe I'd have been happy if I got a show before they invaded my cupboards.

September 8, 1999

Dear Diary,

Now I really, *really* want to move. We went to Marion for Labor Day weekend, and when we got home late last night, our back door was boarded up. When we got inside the house, we saw that our house had been broken into at some point during our vacation. The back door had been kicked in so hard that glass flew all the way through the apartment to the front door. We called the cops to report it, but it didn't do much good.

"Sir, what did they take?" The policewoman looked up from her notepad and motioned toward the living room with her pen.

"Well, they took all the VHS movies that had sleeves. They also took our VCR and a bunch of empty CD cases off our bed." Jeremy glanced over at me with a smirk on his face.

The policewoman raised an eyebrow. "The empty CD cases?"

"Yes," I explained, "I emptied our CDs into our travel CD case before we went on our trip. I just left the empty cases on our bed so I could put everything back when we got home."

"I'm going to file this report, but more than likely it was just a couple of kids trying to find something to pawn. If we find anything, we'll let you know." She picked up her hat and went out to her cruiser.

"That's it? There's nothing we can do?"¹³

"No Tabby," Jeremy sighed, "there's nothing we can do. Now we don't a VCR and we don't have cable. So, I guess we'll have to sit around and look at each other all day." He went into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I sat here all day with Jason and then called Mom and Dad. Dad said he would send us a VCR, and suggested we go to pawn shops and try to get new movies. I told Jeremy the good news and he told me to leave him alone. He couldn't believe that I was going to take charity from my parents. Why does it matter? They want to help, and we need it.

Love,

Tabby

September 9, 1999

Dear Diary,

Welcome to adulthood – a time when you realize there is never enough money. Jeremy only makes \$1200 a month because he isn't getting his housing allowance yet.

¹³ Let me interject here: I really was that naïve back then. I grew up in a neighborhood where you could leave your bicycles out in the front yard and no one would touch them. Having my house broken into was over-and-above any violation I'd ever dealt with.

With rent, the car payment, and our \$275¹⁴ a month insurance bill, we barely have money to live. I went to the store today and spent \$60 on groceries for two weeks. Jeremy and I survive on a revolving menu: On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, we have chicken legs and a vegetable; on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, we have different kinds of Hamburger or Tuna Helper. That's basically all we can afford. For lunch, I eat peanut butter and jelly. Thank God that Jason is on WIC and eats formula.

I never realized how great my life was with Mom and Dad. We had cable TV with 400 channels, big meals every night, and there was always someone to talk to. I'm stuck in this apartment most of the day by myself with no cable, we're barely scraping up dinner, and I've run up a huge phone bill talking to Mom. We got the bill yesterday, and it was \$300! How are we going to be able to pay that? I love Jeremy, I swear I do, but I don't know if I can take much more of this. Jeremy says I'm upset because I'm a spoiled brat. Maybe he's right.

Love,

Tabby

¹⁴ Our car insurance was \$275 a month because Jeremy, in his infinite wisdom, decided to get three speeding tickets in the span of one month. My husband, the genius!

September 17, 1999

Dear Diary,

I had to open my big mouth three weeks ago. I said, "There haven't been any hurricanes near the Carolinas yet. That's promising." If I knew more about the area and the time period, I'd have realized how stupid I sounded. August and September are most active times for hurricanes, and Jacksonville is on a coastline that on a top ten list of "Places hurricanes like to visit."

About two weeks ago, Hurricane Dennis roared off our coastline and then started out to sea. Unfortunately, he stalled out just off the coast. He decided that he didn't get enough of North Carolina the first time, and decided to head back. Then, a week later, when the rivers are all flooded and backed up, in comes Floyd. Jeremy and I sat on our couch last night watching the fuzzy weather report on ABC (the only channel our bunny ears can pick up). We made a deal: if Hurricane Floyd remained a CAT 4, we would go to a shelter. If it downgraded, we would stay in our apartment. It downgraded to a CAT 3 before we went to bed. So, we barricaded our windows, and brought Jason into our bed to sleep. Floyd came howling in overnight at the Cape Fear inlet. This morning, it was grey, but not terrible. Our power was out, but it was on by 10am. By noon, it was a beautiful day; sunny and not a cloud in the sky. You'd have never known there was a hurricane in Jacksonville. But when the pictures started coming in from counties around us, we realized how lucky we were. We saw whole

houses floating down the Neuse River. There were dead cattle and pigs everywhere. I had to turn it off. I didn't want to see it anymore.

Thankfully, we survived our first hurricane with one cracked window. I'm going out to buy some provisions later because the radio said that supplies may not be able to get to Jacksonville for a few days.¹⁵ Then I have to come home and let Momma know that we're ok.

Love,
Tabby

October 15, 1999

Dear Diary,

Hallelujah! Jeremy got some extra money from his Dad. We paid off all our bills and we even got a computer. Jeremy said that it might seem like a flippant expense now, but talking to my family over the internet might cut down on our phone bills. I went into my first chatroom on Yahoo Messenger two days ago: The Abortion Debate room.¹⁶ Those people were crazy; calling each other horrible names, making arguments about whether it is a baby or a parasite, etc. After a while, it settled down and some of

¹⁵ There were two major roads into Jacksonville – Rt. 24 and US 17. Both were flooded out in areas outside of Jacksonville.

¹⁶ Abortion has always been a hot button topic for me. Back then, at 19, I was actively pro-life. Now, as a libertarian, I am more of the "keep your nose out of my uterus" mindset. How does your abortion affect my life?

the regulars began to chat about life: how their kids were doing in school, the neighbor who wasn't trimming their hedges back enough, which dogs made the best pets, etc. There are a few people -- Wildwoman, Krister, Grin_N_Bear_It, and Fakey¹⁷ -- who really seem to like me. It was so nice to be able to have some adult conversation after being cooped up in this house all day by myself. Chatting also seems to be helping my typing skills. Jeremy says I type way too hard and I shouldn't abuse my keyboard. I just have to watch how long I talk. Last night, I looked at the clock and it was 3a.m. Time just slips away when you are having a good conversation!

Love,

Tabby

October 31, 1999

Dear Diary,

Jeremy had all the guys over from flight school last night. I made fried chicken, mashed potatoes and corn on the cob. Everyone ate and had a great time. Afterward, the guys hung around and watched *Full Metal Jacket* while drinking beer and Southern

¹⁷ In 2003, I met Wild (Donna) and Fakey (Andreas) when I helped Donna plan her husband's 50th birthday party. Andy met me there too and took me to the Columbus Zoo for my 23rd birthday. Great people.

Comfort.¹⁸ I sat in our bedroom where Jason was sleeping, and Jeremy brought me a Big Gulp sized glass of sweet tea he'd made.

"Here baby. Are you sure you don't want to hang out with the guys and me in the living room?"

"No, no...I'm fine. I want to keep a clear head in case Jason wakes up tonight. Have fun with your friends. I'm just going to read a book and go to bed."

"Ok Tabby. Some of the guys might sleep over. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Just keep it down."

Jeremy left the room, and I settled in with my sweet tea and my latest Jennifer Crusie novel. I took a sip, and something tasted off, but I didn't really think too much of it. I drank the rest of the glass and put it on the bedside table. After a little while, I started to feel really warm and tired, so I turned off the light and went to bed.

I woke up with Jeremy on top of me, struggling to get my underwear off. "Jeremy, what are you doing?" I felt like the room was moving, even though I wasn't. "What is wrong with me?"

"Oh, come on baby, give it up. Don't you feel really good right now?"

"Jeremy, what did you do?"

¹⁸ *Full Metal Jacket* and drinking was a typical night when Jeremy's friends came over. I can still, to this day, recite the entire opening scene.

"I didn't do anything...except for spiking your tea with about four shots of So-Co. So, come on..."

"Jeremy, Jason is sleeping and your friends are in the next room, and I'm tired. Not tonight, okay?"

"They're all passed out, Baby. Besides, you know you want to." He'd finally worked my underwear off and pushed himself inside me.

I laid there until he was finished. Then I turned over and went to sleep as he spooned me. I had a sick feeling in my stomach and cloudy feeling in my head. Diary, did Jeremy do something wrong? I mean, he is my husband, and I didn't say no. Do I even have the right to say no?

Love,

Tabby

November 10, 1999

Dear Diary,

Tonight was amazing! Jeremy took me to the Marine Corps Ball.¹⁹ I wore this cute black dress and flats. Heels would have been a disaster! We had so much fun. He

¹⁹ I actually had to read the Marine Corps Wives handbook to learn the etiquette for this event. The Marine Corps Ball is important on the base – it is the celebration of the Marine Corps Birthday – November 10, 1775 at Tun Tavern.

introduced me to all his superiors, who all took my hand and told me to call them by their first name instead of *Staff Sergeant So-and-So*.²⁰ I hung out with Jeremy's friends too. Kerns and Burgess²¹ are great guys. They told me to call them Justin and Scott, but since Jeremy calls them by their last names, it has kind of become a habit.

The party was great though. Jeremy and I don't get much of a chance to dance together, and tonight was an excuse. We talked, laughed and had a great time. It was like prom or something. It's nice to feel included in something that usually makes me feel like such an outsider. By being invited in as part of the pomp and ceremony, it's almost like I've been introduced into the Marine Corps community. I loved it. I can't wait to go back next year!

Love,

Tabby

²⁰ I've never encountered one upper level Marine who has expected me to call him by his rank and last name. That is their work name, and since I am not one of their Marines, I can call them by their first names. Of course, I usually still refer to them by their last names...because I'm respectful to those who are older than me.

²¹ Even after the break-up and divorce, these two men remained my friends. Kerns even checks up on me on Facebook every once in a while. He's a police officer now.

January 19, 2000

Dear Diary,

I don't know if I'll ever be happy again. One phrase keeps echoing in my head – *"Jeremy asked me to sleep with him."* I can't stop the images from dancing around me when I closed my eyes. How can this be? Joelle told me this morning.

I sat there, not wanting to look her in the eye, not wanting to believe what she was telling me.

"Maybe he was just messing around," I whispered, not even sure if Joelle could hear me through my ever tightening throat.

"Tabitha, he trapped me in a corner and wanted me to give him oral sex. I doubt he was kidding." Joelle sounded angry.

I stood up, thinking it would help me to make sense of everything. "Joelle, he didn't...I mean, did he hurt you?"

"No, he didn't hurt me."

For some reason, that made me feel better. "I-I don't think I can go shopping with you today, Joelle."

"Tabby, I'm sorry this happened. I couldn't keep it a secret though. Why don't you stay here and get your bearings. Just lock my door when you leave, ok?"

I watched her saunter down the walk as she left. Her stride didn't seem apologetic or sad.

Jason started to fuss. I walked over to his carrier and picked him up. "Shh, baby, it's ok. Mommy's here." Those were the reassuring words I gave to my infant. They didn't match the thoughts moving through my mind. I didn't know what to do next. Walking through Joelle's house, rocking my son, I reached for her phone and called Jeremy's best friend, Justin Kerns.

"Kerns, I need to talk to Jeremy," I said when he picked up. "Could you make sure he comes out for lunch today?"

I picked Jeremy up from work at lunchtime. It took me less than two miles and the right questions to get him to admit the truth – Joelle wasn't lying.²² He had, in fact, asked her to sleep with him and fondled her in our old apartment. He offered no explanation. He told me that if I was more giving in the bedroom, he wouldn't have to look elsewhere.

Diary, I always said that I would never stay with a man that cheated on me. I don't know what to do. I can't call my mom because I don't want her to hate him. I don't want anyone to think less of Jeremy.²³ It was a mistake. I'm sure he won't do something like this again. I mean, he did cry and he said he didn't want to lose me. What a lovely way to spend our one year anniversary, right?

Love,
Tabby

²² Two miles was the distance from Jeremy's squadron to the front gate of MCAS New River. As far as the right questions – once Jeremy was caught, he usually gave up the truth pretty quickly.

²³ I was always protecting J's reputation. Once, when Jeremy was pulling the car around the house, he ran up against the shed and put a streak on our car. I told my mom and dad that I was driving.

February 08, 2000

Dear Diary,

This last month has been so confusing. Jeremy has been completely wonderful to me. We haven't even had one argument. But, I broke my silence about the infidelity to my family; not my mom, but my cousin, Kasie, whose husband used to be a Marine. Chris was abusive and unfaithful, but Kasie stayed because of her kids. The conversation didn't go the way I expected.

"Tabby, you have to get out. Take Jason and run," Kasie said.

"What are you talking about? I can't just leave. Besides, where am I going to go? Jason loves his daddy, and I don't think I can live without Jeremy."

"Girl, trust me...you can live without him. But, you may not be able to live with him. Think about walking in on him with another woman. Do you think you could handle that?"

I thought about that image for a minute, my stomach churning.

"Run, Tabby. Pack up and come home before it gets worse. He's a Marine, like Chris was. You know it's going to get worse."²⁴

"Kasie, I've got to go." I hung up the phone and ran to the bathroom, vomiting up my breakfast.

²⁴ Kasie only divorced her husband, Chris, in the last year. She was with his abusive ass from 1997-2009. Let me make this clear, the Marine Corps doesn't make a man abusive or a cheater – but it does give him the opportunities to become both through stress and long deployments.

I couldn't get that image out of my head for three days. It's time to leave.

February 11, 2000

Dear Diary,

I've been sitting in the bathroom for two hours. I've been in here a lot lately getting sick. The stomach flu is going around, and it is apparently my nemesis.

Dad says he can come down tomorrow and pick up Jason and me if I want him to. He said he could also rough Jeremy up, but I told him that it would be bad for his heart.

I've been packing for the last two days, in between the puking spells. Jeremy is really upset about me leaving. He told me that if I left, he was going to throw himself down the stairs or accidentally fire his rifle the wrong way. He's not a violent person,²⁵ but he doesn't want to lose his family. He says that we are the most important things to him, and he can't live without us. How can I leave?

Diary, I have to go. I can't stop crying and I can't stand to look at that thing on the sink anymore. It's a stick with two pink lines – I'm pregnant.

²⁵ He tends to have a flair for the dramatic.

Tabitha, Part I

“Choices”

“Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.”

-- Mark Twain

I didn’t leave Jeremy. I couldn’t. With an eleven month old, and a baby on the way, I figured it was best to stick it out. Surely Jeremy wouldn’t cheat on his pregnant wife, and he would be more content now that we were going to have two kids.²⁶

On Valentine’s Day, Jeremy got me a dozen roses, a stuffed bear, and the Disney movie *Tarzan*²⁷ on VHS. I thought that meant he was trying – he wanted us to stay together.

Jeremy graduated from his Crew Chief ²⁸training on February 25, 2000, and we were put on the list for base housing. We heard that our wait for a three bedroom house would only be a two or three week wait. That was great, considering it was usually a six month wait.

²⁶ God I was a moron.

²⁷ One of my favorite Disney movies! I still cry when the baby gorilla dies in the beginning. ☹

²⁸ A crew chief is the navigator/in-flight mechanic for a helicopter. Jeremy worked on a CH-53E Super Stallion, the biggest cargo helicopter in the Marine Corps (and possibly the entire US Military).

Life seemed to be turning around. Unfortunately, it was on a 360 degree rotation. In just a few short months, I would be forced to keep up appearances and make the best of the situation that I decided to stay in.

March 20, 2000

Dear Diary,

We saw the new house today. For base housing, it isn't too bad, but I wasn't excited about it when I first saw it.

I turned into Tarawa Terrace²⁹ housing area, worried about what I was going to find. All the houses looked so run down, and they were linked together. I pulled up to 3168 Bougainville³⁰ Drive, and I let out the breath I was holding in a whoosh. The house was a single; it wasn't attached to anything else. I got out of the car and walked up the sidewalk. Putting the key in the lock, I prayed the inside would not be horrible.

It wasn't my worst nightmare, but there were problems. The house had dingy tile floors that matched the scuffed and hastily painted walls. The kitchen was small with little counter space. However, there were no cockroaches (that I could see), and that was a big improvement from our last apartment.

²⁹ Marines tend to name their streets and housing developments after battles. Tarawa was the bloodiest battle in WWII. Should have been foreshadowing, huh?

³⁰ Yet another WWII-era name; the Bougainville campaign in the Pacific didn't end until the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

The screen door slammed, and there was Jeremy holding Jason, a huge smile on his face. Still in his flight suit, he perused the house, getting more bounce in his step with every movement.

"We won't have to worry about utilities or rent anymore. Tabby, I mean, look how great this place is! Plus, it's free! Think of all the money we can save for the kids." He patted my stomach, barely swollen, before showing Jason the bedrooms.

Left standing in the middle of a bare living room, I tried to be more positive about the situation -- maybe I could paint the walls a different color, it would be nicer once the furniture was moved in.

A commotion from the other room broke my thoughts.

"Tabby, Tabby! He's walking!" my husband yelled.

I ran into my son's new bedroom and watched him walking around, almost perusing the room himself. He gave me a gooey grin, patted the wall and said, "Mine."

I may not like this house that much, but none of that matters. From the moment I saw Jason claim his room, I realized that despite the dreary walls and the scuffed tile, this is home.

Love,
Tabitha

November 3, 2000

Dear Diary,

I have a daughter. It is an amazing feeling! Taylor Lynn Clark was born yesterday at 5:26pm. Jeremy was able to be at the birth. He wasn't able to be there when Jason was born because he was away in training. Oh Diary, you should have seen him. He stayed with me the whole time, and cried when he held his daughter for the first time. He nicknamed her "Sugarbear" in the hospital last night. It was adorable.

However, November 2nd started with a small conflict.

I sat down on the couch beside my mom, who had come to Jacksonville for the birth.

"I don't know Tabitha," she said, patting my belly, "I'm getting a little discouraged."

I was two days overdue, with no contractions in sight. Just as my mom patted my stomach, I felt a shooting pain. Mom had the touch, apparently.

"Momma, I think I had a contraction." We sat and timed them. The next one came eight minutes later, and that happened for the next half hour. It was time to wake up Jeremy.

"Jeremy, Jeremy get up. Your wife is in labor."

"Five more minutes Momma," Jeremy said, rolling over in the bed.

*"Jeremy Udell Clark, get your ass out of that bed now!" Another contraction had started. "I'm sorry about the cursing Momma."*³¹

"It's ok sweetie."

We finally got Jeremy on his feet, and we went to the hospital. Since Taylor still hadn't dropped,³² I had to walk at Commissary³³ for two hours.³⁴ When I came back, the doctor broke my water, and it was time to rock.

We get to take her home in the morning. I'm so excited. Her room is done in Precious Moments. You know, people ask if you can love two people at once, and I can tell you, Diary, you can. I have two loves of my life, and their names are Jason and Taylor.

Love,

Tabitha

³¹ I told you, I don't curse around my momma.

³² I remember the doctor's words for this clearly – "Tabitha, the baby is in Canada...we need her in Mexico." It made me laugh, even in hard labor.

³³ This is the base grocery store. While people say the prices were better than out in town, I beg to differ. The meat prices are better, but if you want a good sale price, hit up the Piggly Wiggly.

³⁴ This trip to the Commissary made Jason a base "star". The PR department was taking pictures of the General of Camp Lejeune for the opening of the "Toys for Tots" fundraiser. They asked if the General could hold Jason for the pictures. He showed up on the front page of Lejeune's newspaper, The Globe, two days later.

December 20, 2000

Dear Diary,

Jeremy has been stationed at Stone Bay³⁵ for five months. Thank goodness he gets to go back to his squadron next month. I am so tired of him being gone two days in a row. I'm still really worn out from having Taylor last month. Diary, don't ever have two kids that are only eighteen months apart. It is so hard trying to keep Jason out of the Christmas tree while taking care of Taylor too. I don't know what I'm going to do when this little girl gets up and starts chasing after her brother.

Jeremy came home this morning and told me that we were going to a holiday party at the rifle range. I really don't want to go. I hate meeting new people, and I know my weight embarrasses Jeremy. But, I told him I would go, because I want to be supportive. Jeremy doesn't have that many friends since a lot of the guys from his training unit left for San Diego. Besides, I didn't want to make him angrier. He was really mad when he came home today.

"Tabitha, where are you?"

"What's wrong J?" I couldn't think of why he might be yelling and carrying on like he was.

"Did you call out to Stone Bay asking when I'd be home this morning?"

³⁵ Stone Bay Rifle Range – Technically part of Camp Lejeune, Stone Bay is about 15 minutes outside of Jacksonville. When a Marine is sent there on TAD (Temporary Assigned Duty), he has shifts of two days on, two days off, and every other weekend.

"Yeah? I wanted to know when you'd be home so I could make breakfast."

Jeremy walked across the room and backed me against dryer. "I told you to never call the rifle range. What were you really doing?"

"Nothing."

"Let me guess, you were trying to get your boyfriend out of here before I got home, right?"

"What in the hell are you talking about? I'd never cheat on you!"

He pushed me against the cupboards and then stopped. "Fuck it. I'm going to bed. Eat the breakfast yourself, you cow."

I know, I know, that sounds really bad. But, he was in a bad mood. He's usually good to me. He did tell me that I shouldn't call the rifle range. If I would just listen to him, he wouldn't be like this.

Love,

Tabitha

January 4, 2001

Dear Diary,

I've finally made a guy friend here in Jacksonville. His name is Matthew and he works with Jeremy at Stone Bay. Jeremy introduced us at the Christmas party in

December. Jeremy said Matthew was his best friend out at the Range, and that he seems pretty lonely because he is a single dad. "Maybe you two can arrange a play date," Jeremy joked before going to get more eggnog. Matthew gave me his number and said to call him if I ever needed any help with the kids while Jeremy was gone. He seemed really nice about the whole thing; probably because he understands what it is like to have to work those long hours. I called him last night to talk.

"Hey Tabitha, it's really good to hear from you."

"Thanks. Hey Matthew, I was wondering something. Do you have anyone to watch your daughters while you're at work during the day?"

"I pay a neighbor to watch them now. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought that maybe I could watch the girls. They're about the same age as Jason and Taylor, so it is a win-win: all the kids have someone to play with. Also, I wouldn't charge you anything, so you could save some money."

"Oh my God, that's awesome. Thank you so much! That would be amazing."

"It's no problem at all."

Diary, we talked for three hours after that was settled. I learned that Matthew is from Texas and that he was married for three years before getting a divorce. I feel so bad for him. I thought my life was hard, but it must be even harder for a single dad to raise two girls while being in the Marine Corps. Jeremy told me that Matthew was welcome to come over whenever he wants. It's nice to have someone to talk to. I get along so

much better with guys than I do with girls. Women are so catty, and I can't deal with that. I'm so glad things are starting to look up!

Love,

Tabitha

February 22, 2001

Dear Diary,

I think I might really be dying. I've had the flu for twelve days now. It might actually be strep throat, but I don't want to go to the doctor. I hate going to the doctor. Jeremy told me to go to the Naval Hospital and get checked out, but I didn't listen. Now, I'm too sick to get out of bed and he's gone to CAX³⁶ for two weeks. He's been gone for two days, and the house is trashed. The kids were having lots of fun running things while I sat on the couch, coughing and using so many tissues that I should have bought stock in Kleenex.

Thankfully, Jeremy had the foresight to call in a backup. He asked Matthew to come stay with me. Matthew's girls are with their mom this week, so he's been cleaning up for me and taking care of the kids. I don't know what I'd do without him. He even made me tea and honey to soothe my throat. Last night was a little weird

³⁶ CAX stands for "Combined Arms Exercise". It is a live fire and combat arms training in 29 Palms, California or rather "29 Stumps", the affectionate name the Marines gave the base because it is in the middle of the desert without anything around it. This was Jeremy's chance to fire a .50 caliber weapon out of his helicopter at stacks of tires for days at a time. Rather, it was his playtime away from home.

though. He sat beside the couch and stroked my head until I went to sleep. I'm not sure how long he was there after that.

Should I feel weird, Diary? I mean, I've had affectionate male friends before, but not since I've been married. I'm starting to feel closer to Matthew than my own husband. There has to be something wrong about this kind of intimacy. But, Jeremy is always gone on these deployments, a week here and two weeks there, and Matthew is here with more compassion than Jeremy has ever had. It is so messed up. I have Jeremy in my heart and my bed, but Matthew is the one taking care of me in sickness. Go figure.

Love,

Tabby

March 5, 2001

Dear Diary,

Matthew has lost his mind. He thinks Jeremy is cheating on me with our friend Dawn. He kept trying to convince me at his house the other night.

"Tabitha, listen to me. Dawn³⁷ told me the other night that she's slept with Jeremy three times in the last two weeks."

"That's a lie. Why are you doing this?"

"I wouldn't lie to you. I love you!"

I got up from the couch and grabbed my coat. "You what? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I love you," he said, moving closer. "I hate seeing Jeremy disrespect you. If you were mine, I'd never do that to you."

"Matthew, I love you too...as a friend."

"Bullshit, you know it's more than that."

I walked toward the door and then turned back. "I'm confused, ok." I could feel tears creeping into my eyes. "I know there is more here, but I'm married. I can't do something like this. I can't just leave my husband and be with you."

"He's sleeping with another woman! How much will you put up with before you see that?"

"No, you're wrong; you're lying. You just want me to leave. If I do leave, you don't get to have me. Remember that."

³⁷ Dawn was a friend from high school. I'd actually known her since sixth grade. She married her husband, Jeremy's best friend, about three months before J and I married. We moved to the same town. She was my only friend in Jacksonville until I met Matthew. You wouldn't expect your husband to cheat on you with someone you've know since you were eleven years old.

I left Matthew's house and drove down the street, pulling over in the Super Kmart parking lot to cry. I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote a letter to Matthew:

Dear Matthew,

You were right. I do love you.³⁸ But, I love Jeremy too. I don't know what I am going to do. If I had met you first, things would be different -- but that's not how it happened.

At the same time, I'm scared to death to let you go. What if you are Mr. Right and Jeremy is Mr. All Wrong?³⁹ What if I don't take this leap and lose you and you are the one I'm supposed to be with?

I don't know what to do. But, I didn't want to leave things the way they are. I do love you.

Love,

Tabitha

I tore up the letter after reading it a second time, and I put it in the cup holder of the Neon. Why in the world would I ever send something like that to him? I'm married,

³⁸ I really did love Matthew. I still think about him now. It is one of those hindsight things – if I knew then what I know now (and what you will know soon) would I have left Jeremy right then for Matthew?

³⁹ I had no idea how much this one sentence would come back to haunt me.

for God sakes!⁴⁰ He's right though, Diary. I do have feelings for him.⁴¹ What am I going to do?

Love,
Tabitha

March 7, 2001

Dear Diary,

Jeremy found the letter I wrote to Matthew. Why didn't I throw it out?⁴² He pieced it back together and read it. When he came in the house, he looked white as a sheet. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into the bedroom without a word. When I took a closer look at his face, I saw he was crying.

"Is this what you think of me, Tabby? Am I Mr. All Wrong to you? Do you love someone else?"

⁴⁰ At that time in my life, I could never see myself getting a divorce. No one in my family had ever gotten a divorce. Now, the only people in my family to have ever gotten divorced are me and my two cousins – and we all divorced military men.

⁴¹ It is funny how age changes perspective on things. At that time, the idea of loving two men at the same time seemed impossible. Now, I know that you can love many people, in different ways or the same way, at the same time.

⁴² I still don't know why I didn't throw it out. All I can think is that maybe part of me felt guilty and wanted to be caught. Either that or I really didn't want to litter because I thought someone might see what I wrote. I'm paranoid that way. An example: I never said a curse word until I graduated from high school – I thought someone would hear me and tell my mom.

My eyes widened as I realized that he must have found the letter. "Jeremy, I love you. You know that."

"Really? You love me. You love me and you write letters like this to someone else?"⁴³
*Are you sleeping with him? If you're sleeping with him, I can handle that. But, if you're in love with him, all bets are off. I can't deal with you falling in love with another man."*⁴⁴

"I don't love him. I love you. If I loved him, then I wouldn't be here with you right now. If I loved him, that letter wouldn't have been shredded. Can you please just stop this?"

"Tabby," he said, grabbing me around the waist, "I can't stand the idea of you leaving me. I can't lose you. You and the kids are my life. Promise you will never leave me."

"Jeremy, I'll never leave you," I said, my lips pressed against his shoulder.

Diary, I can't believe he got that upset. I mean, if I had found it, I would have been crushed. But Jeremy seems so distant these days; I forget how fragile he really is sometimes.

Love,
Tabitha

⁴³ To be honest, I don't know why Jeremy stayed with me after this. If the shoe had been on the other foot, I like to think I would have left him.

⁴⁴ Jeremy has this weird idea about sex and love. He believes that sex with someone you love is special, but sex with another random person is just an act – it doesn't hurt anyone and it shouldn't be a big deal. But, if you love someone else...that is a deal breaker. I know, I don't understand it either.

March 15, 2001

Dear Diary,

He's cheating on me. The bastard is cheating on me! Matthew tried to tell me the other day and I didn't believe him. He told me Jeremy was sleeping with Dawn. I thought he was trying to get me away from Jeremy. Then, I came home two nights ago to a dark house and my friend Dawn's car out front. When I walked in, I said "hello?" and there was some shuffling around before Dawn and Jeremy came walking out of the back room. This all happened while our kids were in the house! They both denied it, but I don't give a shit. They can go fuck each other and go to hell if they want. I'm done. I packed up yesterday morning and drove up to Ohio to stay with Mom and Dad. I hope I never see that unfaithful bastard again.

Tabitha

April 2, 2001

Dear Diary,

Jeremy keeps calling me. I don't know what his deal is. I've told him I'm not coming back, but he won't listen. Last night he almost had me convinced to come home.

"Baby, I love you, please come back home."

I rolled my eyes. "Jeremy, why do you want me to come back?"

"I miss you."

"Do you miss me, or do you miss someone cleaning your house, doing your laundry and cooking your meals?"

"No, I miss you, and I miss the kids. Please come home. I can't eat. I can't sleep. Can you please just come home to me? I love you. I need you."

"Jeremy, I love you. If I had a crystal ball, and I knew that you'd never cheat on me again, I'd come back in a second. But, we both know that won't happen. I can't let you keep hurting me."

I hung up the phone after that and cried. Diary, I love him so much, but I won't go back there. How can I trust him again?

Love,

Tabitha

April 20, 2001

Dear Diary,

Yes, I decided to come back to Jacksonville. Don't judge me, Diary. What else could I do? Before you say anything, you need to know that I'm doing it for my kids. They need their dad, and I don't believe in divorce, so Jeremy and I are going to give it

another go. Jeremy continues to swear that nothing ever happened with Dawn, and now Dawn is even swearing it.⁴⁵ J says that I overreacted but he understands and forgives me.⁴⁶ I can't believe I ran away like that. Jeremy said that he couldn't bear the thought of life without me and he wanted to run his car off the road when he thought I was gone for good.⁴⁷ I think maybe this was the wake-up call he needed, Diary. He doesn't want me to see Matthew again, which I understand. I mean, Matthew has been trying to sleep with me for months, and now he's trying to break up my marriage with these allegations. I told him on the phone today that I couldn't see him anymore, and that I hoped he had a good life. He wasn't happy about it, but what could he do? He said, "Okay," and hung up.

While I was in Ohio, we got new neighbors. Melissa⁴⁸ and Mike have two kids and they seem like a nice couple. I think he made a real connection with Melissa. I really like her too. We spend almost every day together now. You know, I think everything is really going to be okay!

Love,

Tabitha

⁴⁵ Yeah...that was a lie. Dawn told me later, after she divorced her husband, that there was something going on between her and Jeremy.

⁴⁶ He forgave me for leaving him because he was a cheating bastard. Isn't that sweet?

⁴⁷ As I said...a flair for the dramatic.

⁴⁸ I have many fond memories of Melissa, and only a few lousy ones, which you'll read about later. I called her Mo-mo. When they poured the new sidewalk that ran between our two houses, we put our handprints together in the cement. Then we wrote "Tabitha and Mo-mo" under them. They were still there in 2008 before our old base housing was torn down to build new.

September 11, 2001

9:45pm

Dear Diary,

I haven't stopped crying for the last twelve hours. I can't believe what happened today. It started out so great. The kids and I were watching *Blue's Clues* on Nick Jr. when the phone rang.

"Tabitha, my God, can you believe this is happening?"

"Well Mo-mo, I've seen the mail delivery on Blue's Clues about fifty times this week, so yeah, I can believe it. What's up?"

"You don't know? You haven't seen the news! Turn on the news now. A plane just hit the World Trade Center!"

"What channel?"

"Tabitha, you're not understanding, hon. Every channel!"

I turned the station over to CNN and there it was: One of the towers had a huge hole in it, and it was on fire. Then another plane slammed into the second tower. It felt like I was watching a movie instead of a live news broadcast. "I have to go Mo-mo."

It was horrible. I sat in the comfort of my living room, eyes red and hand over my mouth gasping as the two towers fell, as the word came in about the Pentagon, and

about the downed plane in Pennsylvania. A good person would think *those poor people*. But not me, no not me; my only thought was *my husband is going to war*.⁴⁹

Jeremy called about an hour ago. He is stuck in Albuquerque, NM. He is part of the flight ferry⁵⁰ bringing the helicopters home from a training exercise. Now they are grounded in New Mexico for at least two days. He told me that they were getting ready to take off when the first plane hit. The order came from flight control that they had to shut down. Our phone conversation consisted of me crying and telling him that we were under Threat Condition Delta.⁵¹ He told me that he loved me and that everything was going to be ok.

Diary, I just want Jeremy back in Jacksonville. I think about all the couples that kissed each other goodbye on their way to work this morning, not realizing it would be the last time they ever saw each other. How did I say goodbye to Jeremy last week? I yelled at him about not spending enough time with me. Please, please just let him come home safe.

Love,

Tabitha

⁴⁹ I did have one more thought that morning: I thought that the terrorists might come to Lejeune next. Everyone locally was saying that we were on one of the largest military installations on the East Coast. For six months after the September 11th attacks, I would flinch every time I heard an aircraft anywhere near our home. And you have to understand – we lived by MCAS (Marine Corps Air Station) New River. Their front sign says, “Pardon our noise – it’s the sound of freedom” because their helicopters are constantly coming and going over the Jacksonville skies.

⁵⁰ Flight ferry a.k.a. flying the helicopters back from training in another part of the country.

⁵¹ This basically means base is on lockdown – no one comes in and no one gets out, no matter if they have a military I.D. or not.

Tabitha, Part II

“Lies and Goodbyes”

If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything.

~Mark Twain

Once Jeremy got back from his CAX training exercises, we were really good for almost a year. I think it had a lot to do with the tragedy. Everyone in the nation felt the sting of 9/11, whether they lost a loved one on that day or not. Couples hugged each other a little tighter, and parents spent more time with their kids. Jeremy and I spent every second together. We would go on dates, we'd walk every evening after dinner with the kids, and we held each other every night. It felt like we had a fresh start to our marriage.

During this period, I joined a group of women called The Enlisted Wives Club of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.⁵² When I joined the forming group, I signed up to be the Hospitality Chairperson. I made a few friends, and it was something to do during the long stretches that Jeremy was gone. They even had daycare at meetings.

⁵² From here on the Enlisted Wives Club will be referred to as the EWC. I met the women who started this club on a message board called “Lejeuners.” I'd known some of them for almost a year, and it was great to be able to meet up regularly. It was the first time I was proactive in my search to make friends in Jacksonville.

Eventually, just like everyone in America, we took down our flag and passed each other in the hallway without a word.⁵³ We went back to our normal routine: we fought and when we weren't fighting, we would pretend that everything was fine. And it was fine – to the outside world at least. We got word that Jeremy would be heading to Iraq while we were watching the one year memorial for 9/11 on T.V. I cried because I was worried. I cried because I knew that everything I'd been scared about a year before had come true. But mostly I cried because I felt guilty over being relieved that he was leaving, and I'd have a break.

Looking back at it now, I would have cried harder had I known what war was going to do to Jeremy and our marriage: when we said goodbye on March 24, 2003, I never saw Jeremy again. The person who came back looked like him, sounded like him, and smelled like him – but it wasn't him; he had changed.

April 2, 2003

Dear Diary,

April Fool's Day to me! A day late, but hey, who's counting? The deployment seemed to be moving along without too many problems until I woke up this morning.

⁵³ Isn't it crazy how everyone just decided to go back to hating each other one day? We all bonded over going to war in Afghanistan and fought each other about war in Iraq (but that is story for someone else to write).

Before I opened my eyes, I knew something was amuck. The sounds were bad – crack, splat, thump! – but the smell was worse! A pungent odor permeating the house made my eyes water. I almost expected to open my door and see green vapor hovering in the hallway.

Instead, I saw a dripping yellow flash running into my daughter's room. I wasn't sure if it was Jason or Taylor, but I was more than a little afraid to look. I tried to swallow the scream leapt out. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was egg everywhere – dripping from the ceiling, clinging to the walls, and soaking into the bed sheets. Yellow and clear goo as far as the eye could see! The smell hit me anew, and I staggered, trying to keep my stomach quiet. I stared at my little slimy monsters, choosing my words carefully. My children stared back at me, sheer terror in their eyes.

"Who did it?" I asked, as calmly as I could handle, though I didn't expect a straight answer from either of my preschoolers.

"He did it!" Taylor yelled.

"Nuh-uh, she did it Mommy!" Jason said as he pointed.

"Mo-om, it was J that got the eggs out of the fridge!"

"But she threw the first egg!"

"But he – "

"Enough!" I screamed. "Get into the bathroom, take off those clothes, and take showers, NOW!"

As they marched off to get cleaned up, I put my hands over my face, wishing away the mess, and wondering where I was going to begin the cleanup.⁵⁴

Diary, I feel like I clean this house just so the kids can mess it up again. It is driving me a bit nutty! I wonder what J is doing right now? It has to be better than this.

Love,
Tabitha

April 28, 2003

Dear Diary,

There's still no word from Jeremy. They told him before he left that he would have limited email access on this trip, but I thought I'd get a letter or something by now.⁵⁵ I'm so worried about him. Every time the phone rings or there is a knock at the door, I jump. It's funny; this feeling is similar to what I felt when we started dating. Who knew that dread could produce just as many butterflies as young love?⁵⁶

⁵⁴ This was not the last food incident the kids had while Jeremy was overseas. The Great Egg Fight of 2003 was nothing compared to Operation Frosting in 2005.

⁵⁵ I received five letters during this deployment and a handful of emails. I've chosen not to share them here because they basically say the same thing – "Hey baby, how are the kids? I miss you. I love you. See you soon."

⁵⁶ However, the "butterflies" that I felt were more like lead balls rolling around in my stomach. No military wife wants to open the door to two men in uniform on her doorstep. Unless the base is selling chocolate bars, this is almost always a bad thing.

It's Jason's fourth birthday and he misses his daddy. He kept asking me all day when Daddy was going to be home. It was terrible. He just stared at the door for two hours. I think, in his mind, he just knew that Daddy would burst through that door at any moment to scoop him up. Of course, that moment didn't come. I had to rock him to sleep tonight while he cried. It broke my heart.

Everything is so odd around here with Jeremy gone. The nights are the worst part. It's so quiet. Once the kids go to bed, there is just this silence that echoes so loudly through the house that I can't stand it. Jeremy is like a ghost to me now. His presence is felt in every room. The memories invade my senses; lyrics to a melody that has faded. Once in a while I'll find a shirt stuffed under the bed or laying on the closet floor like he just left for work this morning in a rush.⁵⁷

I stare at his picture, struggling to remember his smell. I can't remember his voice. It's odd because his voice resonates in my ear unlike anyone else's, but I don't remember how that sounds. Diary, it's like he's dead, without being dead. I don't know long I can take being cut off like this. I can't even feel him anymore.⁵⁸

Love,
Tabitha

⁵⁷ I slept with one of those shirts for three weeks before I finally decided to wash it. Yes, I am that cliché.

⁵⁸ Anyone who has ever felt a real connection with another person can understand this feeling. Even when they are thousands of miles away, you can feel them. I've read stories about spouses who knew before the casualty assistance officers came that their husbands were dead. They lost that connection, or they felt something was very wrong.

June 10, 2003

Dear Diary,

I can't believe it! My friend Sarah wants me to run for Vice President of the EWC! It's crazy, but I think it will be fun. I mean, the kids are going to be at Mom's this summer, and it will be something for me to do while J is gone. What else am I going to do besides sit around and mope, right? The meeting tonight was great. Sarah stood up and asked for nominations for VP. Three girls nominated me! I never realized that many people believed in me or my abilities to do this job.

I met this girl named Jayme recently too. She's part of the EWC and running for Treasurer. We've hung out quite a bit. Fast friends are common around here.⁵⁹ Her husband, Aaron, has the same job as Jeremy in the Corps.⁶⁰ It's great to have a guy and girl friend in the same family. I can gossip with Jayme the stuff going on in my life, and then I can talk to Aaron about cars.⁶¹ It is pretty awesome to feel included like that.

Love,

Tabitha

⁵⁹ If you don't make friends quickly, you don't make them at all. I lived at the house on Bougainville for five years. In five years, I had six sets of neighbors move into the house where Melissa lived in 2001. As Dorothy Gale would say, "People come and go so quickly here!"

⁶⁰ Jeremy and Aaron were both Crew Chiefs, but they worked at different squadrons – Jeremy was with HMH-464 and Aaron was part of the CH-53 training squadron.

⁶¹ I love cars. I mean it. The movies *The Fast and the Furious* and *Gone in 60 Seconds* are two of my favorites!

July 15, 2003

Dear Diary,

This may be one of the best/worst days of my life. I got the vote. Sarah is keeping the presidency, I'm VP and Jayme is Treasurer. It was a lot of celebrating afterward, so much so that Jayme had Aaron drop off the motorcycle and take the kids home in the minivan. When we were ready to leave, I told Jayme I could drop her at home and bring Aaron back to get his bike.

Aaron was acting really weird when I picked him up at the house. We were listening to some Bowling for Soup⁶² and having fun with it, and then he got really quiet. It was raining when we got back to the bike, so we sat there in the parking lot at Midway Park and talked, waiting for the rain to die down so he could drive home.

"So are you excited about Jeremy coming home?"

"Oh yeah," I said, smiling, "it's going to be such a relief to have him home. I hate being alone in that house. It's creepy. Besides..." I stopped, realizing that maybe I was reaching an inappropriate topic.

"What?" Aaron was smiling now. "What is it? C'mon Tabitha."

⁶² I used to love Bowling for Soup. To tell you the truth, I will still roll down the windows in the summer and belt out the song "Almost" from time to time. Don't judge me!

"Well, I'm lonely. I miss having him close to me, touching me." I started crying. I looked over at Aaron and gave him another smile, trying to keep my lips from quivering. "But, I'll be ok."

"You're ok now. Hell, you're more than ok." There was a silence, and then he leaned forward and kissed me.

Oh my God, Diary, it was awful but it felt amazing. I'm not going to lie to you. He wrapped his arms around me, and I pushed up against him. I wanted him. Something was there; a heat in the pit of my body that was using me at that moment. Thankfully, reason overtook the need. I pushed him away and told him to go home.

My best friend's husband kissed me. What in the hell am I supposed to do now? I mean, Jeremy won't care.⁶³ But, Jayme is definitely going to blame me.⁶⁴ I just know it. Is it my fault? Was I flirting? I do know one thing: If I hadn't pushed him away, I wouldn't be alone in my bed right now.⁶⁵

Love,
Tabitha

⁶³ Remember that whole "sex vs. love" philosophy I described earlier?

⁶⁴ I know from experience that the woman is always blamed first in these situations. It is easier to blame the other woman than it is to blame the person with whom you share a home and a life.

⁶⁵ I will admit my fault here. I thought Aaron was cute. Maybe I had a little crush on him back then. I was probably flirting. And yes, I consider that situation cheating...even though Jeremy still doesn't know about this. Well, he probably does now...

October 26, 2003

Dear Diary,

Jeremy's home! It is so great to see him. The kids and I painted two big "Welcome Home" banners and put them on the fences outside of MCAS New River.⁶⁶

The homecoming was so great. The kids and I got there about an hour early, and helped set up all the food for the families. Then, we took our seats on the bleachers and listened as the CO talked to us about how dedicated and brave our spouses are. He said they even earned an Air Medal⁶⁷ for performing the longest night flight in history through Turkey and into Iraq. You could feel the tension all around us. It was an emotion so strong that I thought my heart would explode.

Then, the music started – "Back in Black" by AC/DC⁶⁸ and the entire crowd went quiet. We heard the *thwock, thwock, thwock* of the helicopter blades. The CH-53s came up over the trees. My husband was home.

After about a half an hour, the helos were shut down, and the guys walked up to the bleachers in formation. The CO addressed them, saluted them, and released them

⁶⁶ This might make me seem like a softie, but I still get choked up when I drive by those banners. All the "Welcome Home Daddy" and "We miss you" banners make me feel the sadness and happiness of all those families. It is a bit overwhelming.

⁶⁷ Air medal – the Air Wing's equivalent to The Bronze Star.

⁶⁸ I swear, I think that AC/DC has some contract with the Marine Corps. Their music was always played during events like this – usually "Back in Black" or "Thunderstruck".

to their families. Jeremy wrapped his arms around me and just cried. Then he scooped up the kids and we headed to the car.

The ride home was silent. I couldn't help but think about how awkward it was. I mean, he's home and I'm so glad that he is, but things just seem a bit off. He slept for about two hours when he got home. When he got up, he came in and sat down to watch T.V. He's only said about 10 words to me all day. He has this far away look in his eye, like he's remembering something he doesn't want to talk about.⁶⁹ Maybe things will be better tomorrow.

Goodnight.

December 12, 2003

Dear Diary,

I think I need to leave the EWC. It is just causing too many problems with Jeremy. I went out with the girls from the Club last night, and I got home later than I said I would. Jeremy called me a stupid bitch, pushed me back out the front door, grabbed my keys and locked me outside. I stood there in the cold for half an hour

⁶⁹ When Jeremy did talk, he shared with me some of the horrors during his peacekeeping mission in Liberia. I won't share them with you here. That is one confidence I will keep.

pleading for him to let me in.⁷⁰ Finally, I had to go next door to Mo-mo's. I slept on her couch and went home in the morning when Jeremy had calmed down.

Jeremy says that I can't leave him with the kids all the time. He works all day and it isn't fair that he has to watch the kids all night while I'm out having fun with my friends.⁷¹ I called Sarah and let her know that I might be resigning from the Club. She isn't happy with me, but I don't know what else I can do. I will miss my friends so much, but Jeremy is more important. I need to keep him happy. He just came home, and he's probably leaving again in a year or so. I don't want him to be miserable while he is home.⁷²

Love,
Tabitha

March 11, 2004

Dear Diary,

People won't quit calling me. I left the EWC in January, and people just keep calling me. Why doesn't anyone respect my decisions? I thought these people were my friends, that they supported me. If they are, then why won't they stop harassing me?

⁷⁰ This isn't the first time he acted like this, and it definitely wasn't the last.

⁷¹ I went out with the EWC one night a month for our social event. Our meetings were once a month also, for about two hours each.

⁷² For some reason, only Jeremy's feelings mattered at this point in my life.

Wanda and Genan⁷³ are frustrated. They say that I should not give up my dreams because my husband is too much of an asshole to watch our kids. They keep telling me that I should leave him because of how he treats me.⁷⁴ I'm sick of them being so negative. I stopped answering the phone. Hopefully, they will stop calling. I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't even talk to Mom that much anymore because I hate the negativity. Why can't everyone leave me alone? I choose Jeremy, and I don't need anyone to tell me that is a good, bad or ugly choice.⁷⁵ No one giving me advice is part of this marriage, and they have no right to judge me.

Love,
Tabitha

June 9, 2004

Dear Diary,

Well, I'm 24 today. I'm almost a quarter of a century old. I guess the time flies when you are having fun, right? I've never been so happy. Jeremy and my relationship has been great ever since I left the EWC. I think he was right: the EWC was the reason

⁷³ Wanda and Genan were the friends that I met on the Lejeuners site. They'd known me since 2000. Neither of them understood my actions, and neither did I, now that I think about it.

⁷⁴ They were real friends...they never gave up on me. I still talk to them today.

⁷⁵ I really did need someone to tell me that...I just didn't want to hear it.

for our problems.⁷⁶ If it weren't for those women being in my ear all the time, Jeremy and I wouldn't have fought so much. Now, I stay home with the kids. This family is the most important thing in my life. I cook and bake all the time. Jason starts kindergarten in August. I can't wait for that. He did really well in preschool this year. Taylor and I can start walking down every day to pick him up from school. It will be good for us.⁷⁷

It is a little lonely around here without any adults to talk to. I chat online from time to time with my virtual friends. They are the only real contact I have with other adults, with the exception of Jeremy. Mom calls once a week, but we barely talk about my life. Mostly, she updates me on what is going on with Dad and my sisters.⁷⁸ We talk for about twenty minutes or so, and then I go on with my day. I'm 24 now. There's no time for gossiping on the phone or hanging out with friends.⁷⁹ I have children to raise and a husband to keep happy. It is time to grow up.⁸⁰

Love,

Tabitha

⁷⁶ *big eye-roll here* Jeremy was *always* right.

⁷⁷ I now know that isolating the abused person is how the abuser gains power.

⁷⁸ I regret the rift that began between myself and my mom at this point. She's always been my best friend, and this time period was really hard on me.

⁷⁹ Everyone, man or woman, needs to gossip and hang out with their friends. No amount of a significant other or family member can change that.

⁸⁰ And yet, through it all, I continued to talk to my diary...my imaginary friend.

November 10, 2004

Dear Diary,

Jeremy went to the Marine Corps Ball in Wilmington tonight. I stayed home. Even though Mom and Dad are here visiting, Jeremy said that we don't have the money for me to go. Tickets are \$30 a piece, and I don't have a dress. Besides, I've gone to two. I don't need to go anymore. It's just a bunch of pomp and ceremony. I don't need to be bored by that again. So, I get to stay home while he gets a hotel room with his friends and party all night. It's ok. It's not a party for me anyway. I'm not the Marine, he is. He has the right to celebrate.

Love,

Tabitha

March 24, 2005

Dear Diary,

I'm so upset with Jeremy. He left tonight to go out with his friends, and he wouldn't let me go with him.

"Come on J. You have two days until you leave for deployment. I really want to go with you. Please?"

"Tabby, you wouldn't have any fun. Plus, you're being there would make the guys uncomfortable. Just stay home."

I started to cry. "Jeremy, I don't understand. I get along great with your friends. Why would I make them uncomfortable? Baby, I just want to spend time with you before you leave. Mom and Dad are here, we have a babysitter."

"Tabby, I said no. This is my night to go out and have fun."

Diary, I called to ask his friend Derek if he was there yet, and he said Jeremy was in the bathroom. Then, I tried to call Jeremy and the phone was off. I told Mom that I couldn't get ahold of him, and she raised an eyebrow. I know what she thinks, but Jeremy isn't like that. I shouldn't have told her anything. Well, it's 3am, I haven't heard from him yet, and now because of Mom, my head is spinning with all the things he could, but wouldn't,⁸¹ be doing. He leaves in two days. Why doesn't he want to spend time with me?

Love,
Tabitha

March 26, 2005

Dear Diary,

Jeremy left for deployment this morning. He said goodbye to the kids at the house. Mom was babysitting for us. Jason latched onto his middle, like any five-year-old would do, and Taylor was on his leg. He picked up his four-year-old "Sugarbear"

⁸¹ Yes...he would.

and gave her a hug before grabbing Jason up and spinning him around in a circle. Then it was time to go.

Driving to the base was one of the hardest things about this morning. We pulled into the parking lot of the squadron, and I decided not to go in. I didn't want to put myself through the anguish of watching the helicopters leave.

We got out of the car, unloaded all his gear, and then sat together silent on the trunk for what seemed like five minutes.⁸² He looked at his watch, knowing it was time to go, and jumped down. He stood there, with his arms around me, and sang "Leaving on a Jet Plane" in my ear. He knows just when I need his cheesy, adorable whispers.

"I'll see you soon," I said to him.

"You'll be fine. Six months isn't as long as you think,"⁸³ sweetie. I'll be back before you can miss me," he promised.

One kiss and he was gone. He vanished into the darkness of the huge metal hangar, and I realized that I wouldn't stand next to him again until the end of September.

I miss him so much, Diary. I worry about him constantly when he is away. It is hard to not have the daily conversations with him. I don't know what I would do if I

⁸² It was more like an hour.

⁸³ ...but a lot can change in six months. That's the part he left out.

ever lost him. Jeremy is my best friend,⁸⁴ my soul mate.⁸⁵ I pray that he is safe in Iraq. He got through it once and earned a few medals. I hope he doesn't end up with any more stars for his Combat Wings.

Love,
Tabitha

March 27, 2005

Dear Diary,

John⁸⁶ came over to mow the lawn today. He is Jeremy's friend. For some reason, Jeremy doesn't seem to think I can take care of myself, so he appointed his best friend to look after me. I swear I don't understand J's logic. He's been deployed before; once for three months while I was pregnant. It's not like I can't handle the pressure of him being gone. So, why does he feel like I need a babysitter?

It isn't that John is a bad guy. He and J have been friends for a long time. But, he is a kid...only nineteen, and I am sure he has better things to do than look after me and the kids. Nevertheless, he was here early this afternoon to start mowing this massive

⁸⁴ In a weird way, despite all the bad things, Jeremy is still a good friend of mine. Odd, huh? I guess that's how that quirky thing called love works.

⁸⁵ But, he was not my soul mate. He came later.

⁸⁶ Enter – the soul mate. And, before you put assumptions on that, let me give you my definition of soul mate. A soul mate is someone who compliments you completely, though not in a romantic way. Romantic entanglements mess up a relationship and the relationship you have with a soul mate is too precious to mess up. More on that later.

lawn. I told him that I would pay him, but he wouldn't hear of it, so I invited him to stay for dinner.

I remember when I met John. He came to the door one day and asked for Jeremy. After he had left, my conversation with Jeremy went something like this:

"Hon, what'd the kid want? Was he selling something?"

"No, Tab, he's a friend of mine."

"Oh, I thought he was in the JROTC⁸⁷ at Lejeune High School. He looked about 15."

J got a laugh out of that. He explained that he met John through his friend Brad down the street, and recently, he saw John during a workup on ship. When they realized they would be going on deployment together, they bonded. A few weeks later, it was decided that John would stay back as part of the rear deployment.⁸⁸ John jokes that they are only friends because he had an SRT-4⁸⁹ that Jeremy wanted to drive.

I have to say, Diary, it is nice to have someone around, but I am not entirely comfortable having another man in the house with Jeremy gone. Something doesn't seem right about it. The neighborhood is full of gossip queens. I would become the topic of their daily cackling if John keeps coming over here. Think about it: my

⁸⁷ JROTC – Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps

⁸⁸ The stateside arm of the deployment; someone has to stay around to watch the unit while the kids are away in the sandbox.

⁸⁹ This is the turbo version of a Neon. Yes, a Neon; remember that "throwaway car" I told you about?

husband is gone, and another man is frequently coming over to keep me company? I might as well put a red light on my porch and welcome the men in with open arms like some the tramps in the area. That's one of the reasons I left the EWC – people who couldn't mind their own business and keep their mouths shut.

Ok, enough carrying on for one night. I have dishes to do.

Love,
Tabitha

April 3, 2005

Dear Diary,

I got an email from Jeremy today. This one came way faster than it did last time.

The *Iwo Jima* must have better service than the *Kearsarge* did.⁹⁰

To: "Tabitha Clark" tlc_2005@yahoo.com
Sent: April 3, 2005, 18:00
From: "Jeremy Clark" juc_2000@yahoo.com
Subject: Hello from the Boat

Hey Baby,

So here I am, writing to you from the back of my plane,⁹¹ "The Deuce" 22, on the *USS Iwo Jima*. We are in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We will be in the Mediterranean soon. Not too much else going on here on my end.

⁹⁰ The *USS Iwo Jima* and the *USS Kearsarge* were ships that transported Jeremy overseas during his deployments.

⁹¹ They referred to their helicopters as "planes" most of the time.

Enough about me, how are the kids? Tell them that I will be home soon and that Daddy loves them very much. I hope they don't forget about me or think that I left them.

Well baby, I don't have much time left. I gotta get ready for another training flight. I really miss you and love you so much. I wish I was home right now, so I could hold you and kiss you, not to mention, sleep in our bed with you next to me. I love you a whole heap!

Love Always,

Jeremy

It is so great to hear from him, Diary. I hope the emails keep coming on this deployment! It would be so great to get more chances to talk to him.

Love,

Tabitha

April 5, 2005

Dear Diary,

I have read and reread Jeremy's email. I wrote him back telling him about all the day-to-day nonsense going on around here. I can't wait for him to send me another email. It is kind of a disappointment though. I find myself checking my inbox hundreds of times during the day, craving that little piece of him from so far away. It has only been about two weeks, and I want to hear his voice again. I don't quite remember how he sounds. I must be losing my mind, Diary. I actually miss the weird

hours, the fighting and making up...I even miss the smell of jet fuel and grease⁹² the stinks up the house. At least that smell lets me know that he is home and safe. I want to smell jet fuel again.

Love,

Tabitha

To: "Tabitha Clark" tlc_2005@yahoo.com
Sent: April 26, 2005, 13:00
From: "Jeremy Clark" juc_2000@yahoo.com
Subject: Daily Tally

Hey Tab,

How are the kids? I really miss them. Things are going well here. I am busy all the time. Anyway, I gotta get ready to fly. Tell the kids I love them.

Love ya,

J

⁹² This may seem disgusting, but at one time in my life, I found it comforting and intoxicating all at the same kind.

April 30, 2005

Dear Diary,

Taylor went to Ohio to spend time with my parents while Jason finishes school. Then, I am taking him to Ohio in June.⁹³ This deployment is making my nerves raw. Between the news about Iraq and taking care of the kids, I don't have any energy at all. Every day I try to get out of bed at 0600,⁹⁴ like a good Corps wife and get the day started.⁹⁵ But, every day, I find myself sleeping later and later until it is a mad rush to get Jason out the door to school. Then, when I get back from driving him to school, I go right back to bed and stay there until 1500⁹⁶ when it is time to pick him up. It is easier to sleep, instead of sitting in an empty house thinking about who isn't here. It is easier than cracking open another pint of Ben and Jerry's to add to my 320lb mass. It is easier than looking in the mirror day after day and hating what you have become.

Yes, I might be depressed, Diary, and maybe I have a reason to be. The emails from Jeremy are getting less and less lovey-dovey with each passing day. They are clipped, short, and to the point. He hasn't even talked about when he might be able to

⁹³ This was a common occurrence. My kids went to "Gammy and Papaw's" house every year for the summer. It was kind of like "grandparent summer camp." It was important to me that my children had a chance to bond with my parents; at least more than I did with my own grandparents when they moved to Florida, and I didn't see them but one time between birth and age eleven.

⁹⁴ 0600 – military time for 6a.m.

⁹⁵ My internal clock was completely messed up from my husband's incessant "let's set the alarm for 4:30am and then hit the snooze button every fifteen minutes until 6am. It was a nightmare!

⁹⁶ Once again: 1500 – military time for 3p.m.

call. I have a strange feeling. The last time I had this knot in my stomach, it was right before I found out Jeremy had kissed one of my sister's friends last year.⁹⁷ I knew that morning that things had gotten out of hand the night before, and I was right. I am worried.

Hopefully, there is nothing to be insecure about, Diary. It is probably just my imagination running away with me.⁹⁸ Jeremy is a good husband and father. He comes home every night, and he provides everything for us. There is no way he would do anything to tear us apart. He says he loves me more than anything in this world – a whole heap. I just hope that the heap hasn't gotten smaller with distance.

Love,
Tabitha

⁹⁷ My sister, Jennifer, came down for spring break and brought her friend, Jordan, who'd known through our church. We all grew up together. One night, after I went to bed, Jennifer went outside to talk to our neighbor, and Jordan decided it would be okay to make out with my husband in our living room. Jennifer never told me after she found out. I didn't find out until I checked Jeremy's email. I still don't talk to Jordan to this day. Jennifer continues to be her close friend.

⁹⁸ Trust your instincts – my first piece of advice for anyone who thinks their spouse is cheating. If you think it, and you are not a paranoid freak, then it is probably going on.

May 1, 2005

Dear Diary,

I want to die. No, seriously, I want to die. The kids would be better off with my parents anyway. I'm a bad mother, a bad wife...a bad person.⁹⁹ Why is this happening? How could he do this to me, to us? I don't understand. I just don't understand.

Jeremy is cheating on me...did I know it, or have I been blind all this time?

100

⁹⁹ No, I wasn't.

¹⁰⁰ Notice there is no "Love, Tabitha" here. Sometimes...there just wasn't enough love...even for the diary.

Tabb

"And in the End..."

"Someday you're gonna look back on this moment of your life as such a sweet time of grieving. You'll see that you were in mourning and your heart was broken, but your life was changing..."

-- Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat Pray Love*

There comes a time in life when enough is enough. I had my fill on May 1, 2005. I had spent the last seven years getting picked on, teased, degraded, and worse – all because I thought he loved me. In my mind, negative attention was better than no attention at all, and if he came home to me every night, then it must mean he wasn't sleeping with anyone else. I was wrong. As a matter of fact, I couldn't have been more wrong.

The signs were all there: Jeremy had flirted with women for years.¹⁰¹ Now I realize that I knew the truth all that time. I was swimming around a vat of fear in a denial swimsuit, but I was so afraid to be alone that I would put up with anything Jeremy dished out.

Tabb was the woman who was done being pushed around; a woman who tried to seal herself off from emotions as a defense against the turmoil. I became Tabb when I realized that living my life for someone else wasn't working and all the identities I had

¹⁰¹ Flirted, made out with, screwed, etc.

picked up over the years didn't fit anymore. I was mad as hell.¹⁰² Something had to change, and with this new persona, I thought maybe that thing was me.

May 5, 2005

Dear Diary,

Today is my first day out of bed since I found out about Jeremy. The first day I have faced reality; life will never be the same. I look around my room with new eyes, and it makes me sad. There are so many memories in this room, this house. How can I leave it all behind because of one mistake? Why can't I fix this?

I had that familiar knot in my stomach the morning he left. I should have known!¹⁰³ How do I forgive such betrayal? But, then again, how can I not? It's not like he hasn't done this before. And besides, I don't have anything without Jeremy. I haven't worked in years; I don't have any family down here. Plus, look at me! I've become the size of an elephant! If I leave Jeremy, I'll be alone for the rest of my life. No one else would ever want me. Death might be easier than this.

Love,

Tabs

¹⁰² Understatement of the year

¹⁰³ Yes, I should have known. After Joelle, Dawn and Jordan, you think it'd be easy to pick up on.

May 7, 2005

Dear Diary,

John has been a godsend during this last week. He has been sleeping on the couch since the day I found out. He gets Jason ready for school, takes him to school, and then goes to work. He comes here every day for lunch to see if I need anything, and he takes care of Jason at night. I don't know what I would do without him, Diary. We have become good friends in the last month or so since J left, but I never expected him to step up like he has.

John told me about Jeremy. I think he wishes he hadn't.¹⁰⁴ He was there the night Jeremy cheated. He told me that when he and the other guys left, Jeremy and this woman were in the room alone together. Jeremy told him the next day that he slept with her. I wonder if he told John as a confidant or executioner¹⁰⁵.

Now Diary, don't get the idea that John is a bad guy. He didn't offer the information freely to rat out his good friend, and he didn't drop hints. I have had a feeling something isn't right. So, I asked John if J had been unfaithful.

We were sitting side by side on the couch watching a movie. John looked at me with eyes the size of dinner plates. He got up from the couch and let out this huge sigh. "Tab, don't put

¹⁰⁴ I interviewed John before I started writing this thesis. He said that he was glad he told me. Jeremy wasn't that great a friend to him anyway, and he didn't know about his past. Plus, apparently, Jeremy used to tout me as the "bitch from hell" to his friends at work, so John was surprised when he met me.

¹⁰⁵ Probably both. I wonder today if Jeremy planned to have John tell me when he was ready to leave.

me in this position," he pleaded. I pressed on; I needed to know. He gave up the ghost; he told me everything he knew about the night before Jeremy left for deployment. Tears slid down his cheeks when he told me, as though he knew he was throwing away a friend with every syllable.

"Jeremy talked to me the day he left. He said he slept with Fabbie. He said he felt like an ass for doing it."

I looked at him and tried to remain calm. My heart was racing. "Did he tell you anything else?" I didn't want to know the answer.

John looked up at the ceiling and sighed again. He began pacing around the living room. "He asked me what he should do. He said he was married to the wrong person, and he wasn't sure how to tell you that. He said he found a person who he thought he could love more than he could ever love you."

He loves someone else more than he could ever love me.¹⁰⁶ What did I do that was so wrong? That's what I really want to know.

Love,

Tabs

¹⁰⁶ The person that Jeremy loves more than anyone else – Jeremy.

May 8, 2005

Dear Diary,

I got a Mother's Day card in the mail from Jeremy today postmarked April 25, 2005. It read:

Cover: *For My Wife on Mother's Day – You will always have my love. In everything you hope or do, I'll encourage and believe in you. For every joy is my joy too – You will always have my love...*

Inside: *No matter what, no matter where, you can count on me and I'll be there, to understand and show I care. You will always have my love. You're at the heart of everything that truly matters to me. I love you and I always will. Happy Mother's Day.*

Hand Written Sentiment: *I love you, Sweetheart. I hope this gets to you in time. Love always, Jeremy.*

Gee, that is so sweet, Diary. This pink, flowery card would have been corny but cute a few weeks ago. Now, it just turns my stomach. That last line is telling though. It's almost as if he knew something was wrong here: I hope this gets to you in time. Not on time, but in time, Diary. Did he know?¹⁰⁷

Love,

Tabs

¹⁰⁷ He didn't. He was just writing fast and didn't think about it.

May 9, 2005

Dear Diary,

I have been thinking about my options:

- A) I leave Jeremy. I have no money, no job, and no place to live (except with my parents). I am pretty much destitute. I have to yank the kids out of school to move from North Carolina to Ohio, and they will never get to see their dad.¹⁰⁸

- B) I stay with Jeremy. I never know if he is out sleeping with someone else. I am always wondering when he might walk out on me. The kids see what is going on as they get older. Jason realizes that it is okay to emotionally abuse and cheat on his wife or girlfriend. Taylor learns that it is okay for a woman to be treated this way.¹⁰⁹

I just need some time to think...and I really need to talk to J so I can figure out what in the hell is going on.

You know, Diary, J left his best friend to watch over me while he is gone. This isn't fair to John. He shouldn't have to take care of my emotional issues and my family because Jeremy fucked up. Who knew he would have to clean up J's mess and deal

¹⁰⁸ I can't remember now why this seemed so insurmountable. Then again, considering my position now, I can see why I wouldn't remember. Just wait until the epilogue.

¹⁰⁹ Why in the hell was this an option?

with the fallout of J's decisions?¹¹⁰ Now I need to take a deep breath and write Jeremy an email telling him that I know everything.

Love,

Tabs

To: "Jeremy Clark" juc_2000@yahoo.com
Sent: May 9, 2005, 22:00
From: "Tabitha Clark" tlc_2005@yahoo.com
Subject: The Truth comes out

Jeremy,

When were you going to get around to telling me you didn't love me anymore? Or, did you just plan on John being your mouthpiece? Then again, maybe you were going to wait and see what happened on deployment. Did you want to see if Fabbie could stand you for six months and then leave me high and dry when you came back?

As you might be able to tell, I know what you did the night before you left. I know you slept with Fabbie. I know you are in love with her. Good for you! You are a lucky man because you and your wife are in complete agreement: I think I am married to the wrong person too. Now that everything is out in the open, what do you think we should do about this mess?

Tabs

¹¹⁰ John has stuck with me for the last five years. He's a good guy. But, I do think he has battle scars from dealing with this at ages nineteen to twenty.

May 18, 2005

Dear Diary,

There is still no word from Jeremy, Diary. I wrote the email over a week ago, and he still hasn't said anything. Sometimes this silence works against him because I think he is not responding because of his guilt.¹¹¹ Other times, I think I have made a mistake. Maybe I shouldn't have trusted John so easily. I have only known him for a couple of months, and I've known Jeremy for seven years. Matthew did this before and almost tore apart my marriage. Why was I so quick to trust the word of someone who is basically a complete stranger?

Love,

Tabs

May 20, 2005

Dear Diary,

The woman that's sleeping with my husband came to my house today to plead his case in his absence.

I opened the door and saw her standing there, only a screen separating us.

¹¹¹ It was guilt...and lack of email time because he was in Iraq. I seemed to gloss over the part where he was in a war zone as this was going on.

"I'm Fabiola," she said.

Trying to contain myself, I gave a little smirk, and held on to the screen door to keep from ripping her head off. "And?"

"Well, I just wanted to let you know that Jeremy and I are just friends."

"So, you sleep with all your friends, married or not?" I asked.

"No, it's not like that."

"I don't believe you. If you and Jeremy are just friends, I'd have heard of you. He wouldn't hide his 'friend' unless there was something to hide."

"No, he just didn't tell you because you're so damn jealous. But, then again," now she was smirking, "you have everything to be jealous about. You're a whale. Honestly, I don't know what he sees..."

Diary, I was out the door in less than a second. I'm not much of a fighter, but my fist was at my side and about to go through her. I mean, how dare that little wench come on my porch after making out with my husband and not only lie to me about it, but insult me as well! By the way, I got a lot of satisfaction out of making a female Marine back up about twenty feet. Aren't they supposed to have no fear and be trained

to kill? All I do know is she would have been reduced to a smelly stain on my sidewalk if John hadn't appeared in front of the house at that moment.¹¹² That girl is *really* lucky.

What the hell kind of name is Fabiola anyway? It sounds like goddamn cooking oil¹¹³!

Love,

Tabs

May 25, 2005

Dear Diary,

The hits just keep on coming! I feel like I am standing on the beach, being pounded by the waves. When I try to get up, I am knocked down the by the next wall of water.

John and I were getting ready to go to IHOP for breakfast when my sister called. Jennifer cried and begged me not to be mad at her. She said Mom told her everything about what happened with J, and there was something she had to tell me. I steeled myself for what might come next.

¹¹² Let me make something clear: I'm not a violent person, and the closest I'd ever been to a fight at this point was being shoved in my locker in sixth grade. However, there are some moments in life where rage takes over. This was one of those moments.

¹¹³ Doesn't it? I still think it does.

"I slept with Melissa, Tabby."

"What!?" My mind raced: He slept with Mo-mo. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Tab, Jeremy only told me about this last year.¹¹⁴ I tried to drop hints while I stayed with you. I wanted to make sure you could handle it. When I realized you weren't ready to leave him, I kept his secret. I knew it would only hurt you, and you might take it out on me. But, after what has happened, you deserve to know, whether you are ready or not. I hope it helps you to make a decision."

I searched for words, but nothing came out.

"I love you Tab. I hope you'll stop hating me one of these days."

With that, she hung up the phone and left me gaping at John.

"Is someone dead?" John asked.

"I feel like I am," I said, sinking down onto the couch cushions.

There were so many things I wanted to say – hell, things I wanted to scream – at Jennifer. I wanted to know how she could keep something like that from her sister.

¹¹⁴ I found out through a slip-up a few months ago that Jennifer had known this was going on since 2001, and it wasn't because anyone told her – it is because she was in the next room when it was going on and her boyfriend walked in on Jeremy and Melissa.

Sure, her and Jeremy had been really good friends since we've been together, but that couldn't be why, could it?¹¹⁵

Love,

Tabs

June 9, 2005

Dear Diary,

I finally heard from Jeremy. He called me today, after a couple of vague emails saying things like "how are the kids" and "love ya" without addressing any questions I asked.

"Hello?"

"Hey Sweetie! Happy Birthday! How are you?"

"Jeremy, why haven't you answered any of my questions?"

"Aw, Tabs, come on! I'm getting ready to go into Iraq soon. I can't be thinking about problems at home."

"Yeah, you are probably really lonely out there without your precious Fabbie, huh? I am so sorry that your girlfriend got held back to the rear det. It must be hell for you."

¹¹⁵ She swears to this day that she didn't tell me about Jeremy and Melissa because it wouldn't have done any good and I wouldn't have left him. I don't believe it.

"God, you're not gonna let this go, are you? Fine, Tabby, fine. You wanna hear it? Ok. I slept with Melissa. You didn't know? And while we're at it – I'm in love with Fabbie. Happy now?"

I sat and waited, tears forming in my eyes, not knowing exactly what to say.

"Tabby, maybe we should end this. I mean, I can't stand to hurt you anymore, and I know I can't be faithful. I'm sorry. I love you – but I don't think we can fix this. Maybe we should get a divorce."

"Are you serious?"

"Sweetie, I gotta go. I'll try to call again soon. I mean what I said. Divorce sounds like the best option. I love Fabbie, but I still love you too. Happy Birthday sweetie.¹¹⁶ Bye."

With that, the line clicked and then went to a dial tone. I was left alone, sitting on my dresser, looking at the receiver in shock.

So, as you can probably tell, it is my twenty-fifth birthday. I am twenty five years old now – a quarter of a century, and I don't have any answers. What a birthday present! Jeremy ripped out my heart from half across the world. It's odd to look back

¹¹⁶ Jeremy used to wake me up every year on my birthday at 12:00am to tell me Happy Birthday. He said he always wanted to be the first person to tell me that. I guess he wanted to stick with this tradition no matter how the conversation would go.

on my marriage, seven years¹¹⁷ of my life, and wonder if it was all a wash. Happy Birthday to me...I'm getting a divorce.

Love,

Tabs

June 13, 2005

Dear Diary,

One thing I have learned one thing since the last time we spoke, Diary -- if you don't get out of bed for four days, your sheets begin to smell really bad...like choke a maggot bad.¹¹⁸ I really need a shower.

I haven't gotten out of bed except to go to the bathroom. I haven't eaten anything. I drank a little bit of water, but that is about it. Thank goodness the kids are with Mom right now. I don't think I could handle it if they were here seeing me like this. John came over this morning and gave me an ultimatum.

"Tabby, get up."

"No!"

"Tabby, get up or I'm not coming back over here."

¹¹⁷ For those of you who are counting – Jeremy and I were married in January 1999...so while it was only technically six and a half years, I wasn't in the mood to worry whether or not I was rounding up.

¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, this was not hyperbole in any sense of the word.

"I can't get up. My life is over. My brain hurts. I don't want to face those cackling hens outside today. You know they love good gossip and they know when something's wrong."

"Tabby, stop it! Your life is not over. That's pathetic. Jeremy's a shitbag. We all know this. He did a shitty thing to you, and he will pay for that eventually. But, right now, you are letting him win by doing this to yourself. You need to get the hell out of this bed. It stinks in here, you need a shower and some clean clothes, not to mention some food. I'm going to the grocery store. When I come back, you better be dressed!" John walked out of the bedroom and slammed the front door on his way out of the house.

So, yes, I got up and got a shower. John was right. I can't imagine what he must be going through with all this, choosing his best friend's wife over his best friend. I mean, how do you betray someone you have known for over a year, even if it is the right thing to do? I sometimes wonder if he would betray me too, but I don't think he would. You know, he was right about something else too. This room does stink! I can't believe there isn't green vapor wafting out from under the door or hovering in the hazy sunlight! I think it is time to do some laundry...maybe start cleaning out my closet.

Love,
Tabs

June 15, 2005

Dear Diary,

I love the beach. You know, I used to drive 45 minutes to get to Emerald Isle or Topsail Island to go to the beach when there was a beach ten minutes away on base. Now, sitting in this pavilion and looking over the water, I feel like an imposter on Onslow Beach. I don't belong here anymore. All those years that I was a Marine Corps wife, I didn't come here. I wait until I'm about to be thrown out of this life to really take advantage of all this place has to offer.

I remember going to the beach when J was gone in 2003. I used to look out over the water and pretend I was standing directly across from where he was in Africa. It made me feel closer to him somehow. Now, I look at the vast expanse of water and feel the real separation -- losing a lover, a friend, a confidante. I don't know what to do. I haven't known anything but 'ooh rah' Marine Corps for seven years of my life. How do I start over at 25? How do I run back to Ohio with my tail between my legs, my life packed up in boxes and put in a storage space?

You know, I'm going to miss the beach. The waves fill me with a sense of wonder as I watch them roll in. But, looking at the ocean is bittersweet for me. My marriage is the ocean. I can only see what is visible on top...or the beautiful breaking waves on the beach. There is so much more that is under the surface that I may never see.¹¹⁹ But,

¹¹⁹ There were things beneath the surface that I didn't want to see – infidelity, hatred, abuse – that all came up once we separated. That was a charming end to my denial.

sometimes, the things below the surface are what can hurt you the most. For that reason, the magic is broken. Maybe it is good that I am getting away from this place.

Love,
Tabs

June 23, 2005

Dear Diary,

What an eye opening experience today was...

I had just finished sweeping the kitchen, and I decided to check my email. When I sat down at the computer, I saw that I had an instant message from Wanda. I hadn't spoken to her in at least six months, so I was surprised to see a message.¹²⁰ The contents of the message was even more of a surprise -- *Call me as soon as you can.*

"Hey Wanda, what's up?"

"Tab, do you have a Myspace account?"

"No. Why?"

"Did you get a divorce?"

"Not yet...J and I decided to separate on the 9th, but he is overseas, so we don't have any papers drawn up."

"That's funny. Jeremy is on Myspace advertising himself as divorced. He found me on the site and started flirting with me."

¹²⁰ Yes, we hadn't spoken in six months...and we hadn't been civil to each other in more than a year.

"What?! Um, Wanda, I have to go."

He said the word "divorce" twice in one conversation, and now he is flirting with my old friends and saying he is divorced. What in the hell is he thinking? Shouldn't he take more than just a nanosecond to get over our marriage before moving on?

Bastard.¹²¹

July 5, 2005

Dear Diary,

Happy Belated 4th of July! I would have written yesterday, but I was in Marion watching the fireworks with the kids. John drove me up to Ohio so I could start moving my stuff. He's been a great friend through this whole situation. I mean, how many guys would give up their 96¹²² to help their friend move three states away. It was fun, until last night during the fireworks.

The first spark went up, exploding, the sound wave hurting my ear. I didn't realize until I looked down to see Jason and Taylor's faces that I was crying.

"What's wrong Mommy?" Jason looked concerned until the next blast went off. Taylor came over and hugged my leg, the best a four-year-old could do to comfort her Mommy.

¹²¹ Yep...you know you agree.

¹²² A "96" is a four day leave from the base. Even though the Marines are on leave, they can still only go a certain distance from the base. Thankfully, Ohio was in that range.

"The fireworks hurt Mommy's ears, Jason," my mom explained to the kids, and then she whispered to me, "Tabby, why don't you go sit down for a minute. I'll watch the kids."

"Thanks Momma." I hugged her and walked across the asphalt to a group of benches precariously placed on the grass. Resting my head in my hands, I cried for the duration of the fireworks.

Why did Jeremy have to propose at the fireworks? Why did he have to propose near the spot we were standing? At this point I wonder why he proposed at all.¹²³ The fireworks will never be the same. Instead of being a celebration of freedom and independence, they are about the beginning of what I have now lost, even though the brighter moments give me hope. When will this heaviness leave my chest? One day, I'm going to have to let go and start again, but I don't see that happening any time soon.¹²⁴

Love,
Tabs

July 23, 2005

Dear Diary,

John has basically moved in at this point. He spends his days trying to keep me occupied so I'm not sad, and he spends his nights trying to keep me from walking out

¹²³ He proposed because he loved me, at the time. People fall out of love. That is another life lesson that you get when something like this happens.

¹²⁴ Whether you are saying goodbye or skydiving, letting go is the hardest thing any person ever has to do.

of the house. I've been having a lot of sleep-walking episodes due to the high stress I'm under at the moment.

It is really nice to have John around. I love meeting his friends too. Jeff is hilarious! He's a hick from Mississippi, but he has a deeper side. We have stayed up a few nights talking. Not to mention, we like to play pranks on John when he has been drinking a little too much.¹²⁵

I'm starting to really care about John, and that scares the hell out of me. He has an on-again-off-again girlfriend who I really like. Her name is Abby, and she's this peppy sixteen-year-old. I think she is a little young for John, who just turned twenty yesterday, but she's still nice.¹²⁶ That hasn't changed the way I feel though.

This has to be a rebound emotion, right? I mean, John has been really great to me since Jeremy and I decided to separate. Hell, even before that. He's a good guy, and at this point, I think a good guy is what I need. But, does that translate into real feelings...or is that using someone as a crutch so I don't have to be alone. I mean, I really miss Jeremy despite everything he has done. So, do I like John or do I miss Jeremy? Can you even start to have romantic feelings toward someone so soon after ending a long-term relationship? So many questions, and no answers.

I have no idea what to do right now, and there's no way I'm going to tell John

¹²⁵ John was a fan of Jack Daniels – not an alcoholic, but a twenty year old Marine. Every time he would pass out first, Jeff and I would hide his keys...and his pants. He hated that! It was hilarious!

¹²⁶ Yeah, I was wrong about Abby. Not so nice after all. She strung John along, cheated on him, and exposed him to an STD (which he thankfully did not get). Then, after a year or so, she dumped him and started dating his best friend from back home. Lovely, right?

how I'm feeling. Maybe it is best to just lock this away. In a few months, I'll be in Ohio, and all this will blow over. I'm sure of it.

Love,

Tabs

August 5, 2005

Dear Diary,

Mom told me that the kids made birthday cards for Jeremy a week ago and sent them out. He has been emailing every week or so asking for updates, but we never talked about us...until today. He emailed me talking about how much he missed me.

To: "Tabitha Clark" tlc_2005@yahoo.com
Sent: August 5, 2005, 03:00
From: "Jeremy Clark" juc_2000@yahoo.com
Subject: Miss you baby

Hey Sweetie,

These last couple of months on ship have been hell for me. I can't handle the idea of coming home to a cold house after all this time away. I want to see you. I want to know that when I step off that helicopter at the end of September you will be waiting for me. I want to hold you in my arms. We can figure out the rest later. We can't give up on us. I love you. I messed up...everyone messes up, but you know you love me too. Please, please don't move to Ohio before I come home. I can't do this alone.

Love,
Me

I sat crying at the computer, wishing that everything Jeremy said was true, but I know it isn't. He is reaching for the familiar, the convenient. He doesn't really love me...he loves the idea of what we had at one time in our lives. I understand it. I feel like that too. If I had a crystal ball, and I knew that Jeremy would never cheat on me again, I would take him back in a second. But, crystal balls aren't real. No one really knows the future. The only thing I know about my future is that Jeremy isn't in it. I took a few minutes, and then I replied to my soon to be ex-husband.

To: "Jeremy Clark" juc_2000@yahoo.com
Sent: August 5, 2005, 22:00
From: "Tabitha Clark" tlc_2005@yahoo.com
Subject: You' ll think of me

Jeremy,

I understand how you feel. I love you. You gave me two beautiful children and have provided me with several experiences (good and bad) that I would have never had without you. But, I can't be here when you get home. I can't be your warm body to rub up against while you get your land legs back so you can step out on me again. I won't do it. The kids are already in Ohio, and John and I took stuff up there last month. I can't be with you anymore. We should go through with the divorce.

~ Tabitha

P.S. Happy Birthday

Ok, for the record, it does feel pretty good to get some payback for that sucker punch he gave me on my birthday.¹²⁷ Then again, it is best to look forward, not back.

Love,

Tabs

August 15, 2005

Dear Diary,

I'm lying in my bed staring at the empty condom wrapper that's laying on the edge of my dresser. John left for work about an hour ago, and I've been staring at it ever since. One thing keeps going through my mind: *I slept with someone who's not my husband*. Is this who I am now – the girl who has sex because of impulse instead of emotion? Did I just cheat on Jeremy? Have I become Jeremy?¹²⁸ I think I'm going to throw up.

Love,

Tabs

¹²⁷ I still chuckle when I read this. I love when I get a chance to be a little catty and sarcastic to someone that's hurt me.

¹²⁸ I did become Jeremy, in a way. I haven't had the same attitudes about sex and love since the separation. Now, I understand the idea of casual sex, and commitment scares the hell out of me.

September 1, 2005

Dear Diary,

I started my very own MySpace account today. My status is set to "Single," but it feels weird. I mean, I'm not really single. Jeremy and I are still very much married, with just a verbal agreement saying we are splitting up. I don't know what to think, but I like the idea of being able to talk to my friends on a new forum. Decorating the profile is fun, and this way I can still keep in touch with Wanda, Ketsy¹²⁹ and Sarah when I move back to Ohio. Besides, I really like the idea of having my own blog¹³⁰ to air my feelings about my life during the last few months!

Love,

Tab

¹²⁹ I haven't introduced you to Ketsy yet! John introduced me to Ketsy. She was an eighteen-year-old who'd been on her own for two years. She stayed with me for a while when she was between homes. Ketsy was one of the first people to call me Tab on a regular basis.

¹³⁰ I kept that blog current until 2004. Now I have another blog called "The Beauty of Her Breakdown" on Blogger.com.

September 14, 2005

Dear Diary,

The bitch is near – Hurricane Ophelia¹³¹ should hit sometime this morning. John and Jeff kidnapped me and brought me to their apartment last night. They didn't think I should stay on base alone during the storm.

"Tabs, come on girl, you can't stay here," Jeff said, picking up my duffel bag and flinging it onto my bed. "Don't sass me; pack up."

I put my hands on my hips and walked over to Jeff. "You've got to be kidding me. Did you actually call me 'girl' and tell me not to 'sass' you?" Jeff swallowed hard and stood completely silent until he saw me smirk.

"John, get yer girl. She's messin' with me again."

"Hey, she's not my girl. She's no one's girl and she'll be the first to tell you that." John looked over and gave me a wink.

"Yer girl or not, if she don't get her clothes packed, then she's gonna to have to live in the clothes she's wearin' for the next two or three days. We ain't leavin' you here."

"Tabs," John said, looking at me with those big, sad eyes, "please pack your bag and come with us. We don't know how bad this storm is going to be. What if I can't get back over here for three or four days? You know you can't live that long without me."

¹³¹ No real damage with this hurricane, but there was some flooding.

I sat down with a huff and opened the top drawer of my dresser. "Ok, you're right. It would be torture to not see you for that long," I laughed, as I started packing my pajamas. "Besides, if I stayed here, I would just worry about you guys the whole time anyway."

So, I came here. Now I wish I would have stayed home. I'm allergic to smoke, and since John, Jeff and Jeff's wife, April, can't go outside to smoke, they've been huffing and puffing in the house. I've been sick in bed all night. My head is killing me and my sinuses are on fire.¹³² Of course, I get to share a bed with John, so it's not all bad.

Love,

Tabs

September 27, 2005

Dear Diary,

Jeremy came home yesterday from deployment. He begged me to come and see him, so I did. It was really weird to see him again. It almost felt like the last six months and all that anger never happened. I almost completely forgot about Fabbie, the cheating, the lies, etc. He came to the house and stayed. We actually lay in bed together and talked for about three hours. He wants me to stay with him, but I don't

¹³² I spent the entire hurricane in John's bed playing *Final Fantasy VIII* on his Playstation.

know what to do. I mean, I still love him. He's the father of my children. But, I love another man too (even though John doesn't see me that way). What should I do, Diary?

Love,

Tabs

October 21, 2005

Dear Diary,

My friend, you've stuck by me for a long time...but it is time to put you up for a while. I am going to try some online journaling on my Myspace blog so I can get input from others about the situations that go on from day-to-day. Don't worry, I'm not throwing you away, and I will come back to you when I can.

Love,

Tabs

Subject: Blah, blah, blah¹³³

Posted Date: Oct 22, 2005 11:00 PM

Why do people feel the need to evaluate and re-evaluate their lives all the time? The way I see it, figure out what you want to do with your life, and do it. Surround yourself with people who really care about you and love you (not fake people who just use you until they are done with you), and your life will be almost perfect. If you want to shave

¹³³ From this entry, until November 11, 2005, you will be reading artifacts from my actual Myspace blog. I have changed very little about them to keep their integrity intact.

your head and be a dancing monkey on 34th street, FINE!¹³⁴ Just make sure you keep your cherished ones close to you in case you slip on a banana peel and need some help up. It bothers me when people let others live their lives for them, or when they live their lives completely for someone else. You can't make someone else happy if you are not happy yourself. I found that out the hard way after years of depression and anxiety. A drug does not make you happy, and you can't validate your life through a relationship with someone else. You need to be your own person before you can be something to someone else. I couldn't be part of a marriage until I realized who I was on my own besides a wife and mother. Now that I know who I am, I know what I want for my future, and I am ready to make things work with my husband. I just hope others that I care about don't have to learn things the hard way like I did. Please learn from my mistakes, don't make them for yourselves.

Love to all 🍷,
Tabs

Subject: Happiness

Posted Date: Oct 23, 2005 10:54 AM

Last night, my husband and I talked about whether we were currently happy with the way things are going in our lives. We realized that we are not completely happy with the way things are, but we love each other, and we know we can be happy together if we work on it. I realized that our perceptions of happiness were completely different. I am happy, but I am really scared of what the future will bring. I have been hurt so many times before that I am obviously a little gunshy¹³⁵ about completely opening up my heart to this man again. I also realize that I need to leave the past in the past. I can't keep throwing past mistakes up in my husband's face every time he turns around if I want this to work. That will make him unhappy, and eventually will drive him away. It is really hard to let go of 7 years of pain and heartache, but I have. The only thing that remains is the lack of trust. I have to find a way to trust this man, or we will never really have a relationship again. The question is, after 7 years of letting a relationship deteriorate, is it too late to save it? Is it beyond repair? When is the point of no return for the emotional scarring to heal? Hopefully, we can figure this out soon, without hurting each other again.

Love to all, 🍷
Tabs

Subject: Urg!!!

Posted Date: Oct 24, 2005 11:09 AM


Ok, this is my third day of a massive head cold. I wish this thing would lighten up, because right now it feels like my head weighs 100lbs. Now, for those of you that know

¹³⁴ This could very likely be one of the funniest things I've ever written.

¹³⁵ No shit! Wondering if I could trust him or not was the least of my worries.

me, yes, my head is large, but not that large!¹³⁶

And on top of my cold (if that wasn't bad enough), my hubby was deployed for hurricane relief in FL. So, he won't be back for at least a week if not longer. This means he will probably miss trick- or-treating with the kids, and our daughter's birthday. Did I ever mention how much I dislike the Marine Corps at times? Now, I am not a wife that complains every time her husband goes on deployment, far from it. But, it does bug me when he just got back from a 6 month det¹³⁷ and they send him off for another month (possibly). The Marine Corps makes my ass twitch!

Love to all, 


Tabs

Subject: Truth

Posted Date: Oct 25, 2005 10:31 AM

How do you rebuild trust in a relationship where that link has been obliterated? If I could figure this out, my life would be perfect. After 7 years of lies, how do you know when someone is being honest, even if they claim to be honest? In the back of my head I think, "Ok, is he really being honest, or is he lying about being honest to make me think he won't lie to me?". And knowing how the truth has hurt me in the past, I wonder if he will tell me the truth if he ever truly messes up again. One quote comes to mind -- "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive" - Sir Walter Scott. The first thing that J always tells me after I find out a lie is "I didn't tell you the truth because I figured if you didn't know, it couldn't hurt you". I am sick of people thinking I am so fragile and delicate that I cannot handle bad news. I am stronger than most people give me credit for. So please, just tell me the truth, no matter how detrimental to my soul, because I will survive it. Of course, you may not survive it. As William Congreve said "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned".

To summarize my rant: Tell me the truth, and deal with the consequences. I will either cast you out of my life, or I will forgive you. But, to deceive a person is to attempt to control their lives in some way, and I will have no one control my life. I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. No one can take that away from me, and deceptions will always be revealed.

Love to all, 

Tabs

¹³⁶ Actually, my head kind of resembles that of a Saint Bernard. It is a large head.

¹³⁷ "Det" a.k.a. deployment

Subject: The Chaos that is my life¹³⁸

Posted Date: Oct 28, 2005 10:20 PM

My life is full of chaos at the present moment.

Sometimes I wish I could just become one of those numb women. You know, the women that don't care if they are loved or hated, the ones that can go through life without having to feel pain or anguish (while yes, the flipside is giving up love and happiness *wah, get over it, I am cynical*) I wish I could just stop feeling anything for anyone. But that isn't going to happen, because I am a caring, emotion-filled person. Reality is biting and cold. Frigidity is a must to keep up appearances. My only question is not a simple one to answer...How do you keep smiling on the outside while dying on the inside?

Love to all,
Tabs

Subject: Life in general

Posted Date: Nov 6, 2005 10:36 PM

My soul is empty, my heart is cold. I have tried so long to make this marriage work, but it isn't going to happen. The love is gone from my husband's eyes; they are black as night when they look at me. I am not sure what to do when someone stops loving you. A trauma like that should kill you, but it doesn't. I am not sure how I will persevere, but I know I will. I have never felt more lost and more alone than I do at this very moment. The world as I know it has been turned upside down, and there is nothing I can do to make it right again. Things will never be as they were, no matter how hard I try to make them that way. And in the end, it is probably for the better. When you are desperate to hold onto someone, you remember the good times while overlooking the bad. But, in retrospect, the good times were mediocre for the most part, and the bad times were plentiful.¹³⁹ So, maybe the end of this era is for the best, even though it does not seem that way at the current moment.

Love to all,
Tabs

Subject: D-I-V-O-R-C-E


Posted Date: Nov 8, 2005 2:08 PM

So, I am getting a divorce...that is so strange to say. My husband has decided that it is easier to start over than to fix a long relationship. I feel sorry for the next victim he

¹³⁸ You may be asking yourself, "Why the abrupt switch in mood and outlook?" Well, I'll tell you. Jeremy talked me into reconciling with him and moving myself and the kids back to NC for good. Then a month later, I found out that he has a girlfriend, and has had a girlfriend since the day we left Ohio. To add insult to injury, he called his girlfriend from my parent's phone to tell her that he was on his way home.


¹³⁹ Yay! I finally started to wake up and realize that maybe I deserved better than mediocre or downright bad treatment from my husband!


picks. Then again, if what I have heard is true, he will be the victim in this case. I feel sorry for women who feel the need to pursue married men. Their lives must be so empty. But oh well, Dana, you are doing me a favor anyway. So, yes, I thank you. My husband couldn't be faithful to a pair of old socks, and it will come back on him three fold. This is the usual for a man: he would rather leave with trash than keep a good woman. I say...so long, have a nice life, and watch your back because karma can be a bitch!¹⁴⁰

Love to all! 
Tabs

Subject: Ok....

Posted Date : Nov 8, 2005 8:43 PM

So...maybe my last blog entry was a little harsh to the STBX,¹⁴¹ but what do you expect from someone who has been cheated on repeatedly over seven years? You can only take so much before you have to let out that negative energy. Like I said, it is probably for the best. I do pity women who will date a married man though. I mean, think about it logically: if the guy will cheat on his wife, why won't he do the same to you? It is just a matter of time.¹⁴² There are plenty of good, single guys out there. Isn't it ironic that women are attracted to the assholes, while the nice guys get no play whatsoever? Anyway, I promise to have nothing but upbeat (for the most part) blog entries from now on. lol, I have to give my readers a little pep once in a while! 

Love to all! 
Tabs

November 8, 2005

You have a Myspace Message from Leah:¹⁴³

Dana wanted me to read your blogs....

Not very cool - if you have something to say to someone you should just say it to them.

¹⁴⁰ It is possible to be completely torn to shreds and giddy at the same time. This is where I found that odd pairing of emotion.

¹⁴¹ STBX – Soon-to-be ex

¹⁴² I really do feel sorry for these women. I'm not sure why they believe that a man who cheated on their first wife won't do it again. It is sad. Almost as sad as staying with a man who is a serial cheater and thinking he will change.

¹⁴³ This is an actual message from Dana's friend. No spelling or grammar has been corrected.

I don't know you... however I do know the people you are talking about and feel that you should know that alot of the problems that you are having are not just one sided. You must not have been happy in your life for a while cuz it looks like you have put on some weight. Is that because you ate too many twinkies in a depressing stage while your husband was out fucking around on you..... damn I should have bought stock in hostess! I too was married to a marine, and they work some long ass hours, have to put up with alot of bullshit, and deploy it happens. Seems that you just want to say he was doing something he wasn't to justify the things that you did to him - as many women around this area seem to do.

Whatever the case maybe... who was doing what to whom isn't important the thing is you shouldn't bring other people into the problems, and you should just go on with your life.... get the marriage over with... be civilized for your children's sake, and be happy with the boyfriend you have... maybe he will marry you and let you sit on your fat lazy ass all day too!

Subject: For Dana and her friend Leah¹⁴⁴

Posted Date: Nov 9, 2005 9:00 AM

Here's the deal – you (and your friends) can insult me all you want. Talk about my weight, talk about how “lazy” I am (try raising two children when your husband is gone half the time), etc. I don't care. I've been made fun of for years. Nothing you could say will faze me. However, I can lose weight. You will always be an ugly-hearted, husband-stealing tramp. If you don't like that truth, change it.

I hope you and Jeremy have a really great life together.¹⁴⁵ Be happy! You got what you wanted.

T.

Subject: Life is good

Posted Date: Nov 9, 2005 4:13 PM

Today has been a really good day for me. I got some packing taken care of, cleaned the house, and we are having a big family dinner tonight. Everyone is going to be here: Wanda, Ketsy, and John. Are any of these people related by blood? Nope, but we are all related by circumstance. When you live in a military town, and all your biological family is miles away, you need to rethink the idea of family a bit. Build one of your own, so to speak. Everyone brings something different to the table.

John brings caring and compassion. He knows just how to make you smile when you are feeling low. He is the kind of guy that would drive across town at 2am just to give you a hug if you needed it.

¹⁴⁴ I decided to respond to Dana and her friend through my blog.

¹⁴⁵ Too bad that life only lasted until you cheated on him four months later! Like I said...karma...

Ketsy brings her bubbly nature with a Brooklyn accent that just naturally spreads to everyone else in the room. After a while, we all sound like we are extras in "The Godfather".

Wanda brings a sense of understanding of her surroundings and an ability to cope and help others to cope with them. She also has a calming effect.

I don't really know what I bring to the bunch except for a sense of home. I cook, I clean, I take care of the whole bunch in every way possible, be it them, or their children.

I love my family very much, and I don't know what I will do when I have to leave them on Friday. I wish that an understanding could be met, and I did not have to go. But that is not going to happen with the current status of the situation. Anyway, I just wanted to write this tribute to those who have stayed by my side through the rough patches, even though some have contributed to the rough patches at times.

Love to all! 🍷💕

Tabb

Subject: Time to say goodbye

Posted Date: Nov 10, 2005 8:55 PM


Well, after being a Marine Corps wife all these years, the first thing I have to say is "Ooh Rah, Semper Fidelis, Happy Birthday to the Marines here and abroad".

Now, onto our regularly scheduled programming: This is my last night living in Jacksonville, NC. God, it's been quite a run. Let's see, I moved to Jacksonville on August 2, 1999. We lived at 2005 South Drive in New River Apartments back then. OMG, that is where I saw my first cockroach! The thing was bigger than my fist. I threw a size 13 sandal on it, and it KEPT WALKING! That first apartment was a pit, but it was home. Plus, it was the first place I ever shared with my hubby, so it will always be special, even if the hubby isn't anymore, lol.

Into base housing we went on March 30, 2000. It is November 10, 2005, and I am still here. I thought base housing was supposed to be temporary? lol, but we called it home. This place has seen so much celebration and pain; lots of problems here, but lots of good times too. This is the first house that my daughter was brought to, basically the only home my son has ever known (besides my parents' house). So many friends have come through here as well:¹⁴⁶ Jeanne, Rob, Melissa (yes, she slept with my husband, but who cares, she will always be Momo to me), Christy, Danielle, Kairo, Ed, Melissa M., Genan, Wanda, Sarah, Doris, Vicki, Jamie, Aaron, Lora, Tom, Erin, Jennifer, Ketsy, John, Jeff, April, and Priscilla. There are a lot more, but I can't remember their names at the moment. Not everyone is around now, that is how the Marine Corps works, but they are all remembered, and they all contributed (not always in a good way) to my life here

¹⁴⁶ This is a real list of all the neighbors and friends I could remember at the time.

in J'ville. I am going to miss my closest friends, and I am predicting that eventually they will all move to Ohio to be with me. Especially Ketsy, that way I can cook for her!

Love to all and Goodbye! 
Tabs

November 11, 2005

Dear Diary¹⁴⁷,

Dad and I stopped at a hotel in West Virginia about an hour ago. I just needed to lie down for a while. I never realized how draining all this was going to be. Every song on the radio seemed to remind me of Jeremy, or was some sentiment about how I shouldn't give up on him. I had to give up on driving. I called Dad and we pulled over to this Super 8 on the West Virginia Turnpike. He got me my own room, and I flopped down on the bed and buried my face in the scratchy comforter. The only thing I could think of was the how the "Goodbye scene" played out this morning.

I sat on the bed ripping up all the cards I'd gotten from Jeremy over the years; every "I'm sorry" and "I'll change"¹⁴⁸ shred falling into the trash bag where it belonged. I heard a knock on the door and saw Jeremy. It was the first time he'd been in the house in three days. I got up and asked, "What do you want?"

He crossed the room and put his arms around me. All the strength I had built up over our six month separation came crashing down, the ice melting with the touch of every fingertip.

¹⁴⁷ I came back to the diary this last time because I was on the way home to Ohio, and I didn't have a computer. Besides, all the really secret, painful stuff is written in ink...not in pixels.

¹⁴⁸ Every time Jeremy messed up, he bought me roses and a card that said "I'm sorry. I'll change." I hate roses.

"I love you," he whispered. I hadn't heard him say that since the day he had asked for a divorce.

If he asked me to stay at that moment, I would have. That is hard for me to admit. Standing there, with my head against his chest, it felt like no time had passed. Smelling that familiar scent, Gravity cologne mixed with jet fuel, and listening to the rhythm of his heart...I was home. In that moment it felt like all of the wrong in our life could magically be made right if we loved each other. Then the moment passed. He let me go, turned around, and walked out of the room. He never said goodbye to me, only to the kids. I watched him in my rearview mirror as long as I could. Then, I turned onto Tarawa Boulevard and he was gone.

If he had asked me to stay at that moment, I would have. That's really hard for me to admit, Diary. I never thought after all the pain I've been through that it would be this hard to let him go.¹⁴⁹ There is one thing I have learned from all this: the smell of jet fuel will always remind me of what I had...seven years (good and bad) with someone I loved very much.

Love,
Tabs

¹⁴⁹ Like I said, letting go is the hardest thing a person ever has to do.

Epilogue – Present Day – 2010

“Lessons learned”

“The question, O me! So sad, recurring – What good amid these, O me, O life? Answer. That you are here – that life exists, and identity; That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.

– Walt Whitman, “O Me! O Life!”

As I look back on the diary entries that tell my story, I am appalled. There are several questions I can’t answer about that time period, but the one glaring question is “Why did I stay?” It’s simple to see now, all these years later: I was afraid. I was afraid to be alone. I was afraid I would never find anyone else. I was afraid that he might kill me if I left. I was afraid he might kill himself if I left. I was afraid I didn’t know who I was without him.

I don’t know that girl anymore. I don’t understand where she came from, or how she thrived in such a messed up life. I honestly don’t know how she is sitting here writing about it today. I’ve went through periods of depression, suicidal thoughts, and even the want to leave everything and everyone to start new. In the end, I sit here and write. The words are my bandages. They keep all the life I have left in me contained, and they help me heal.

Without the diaries I kept during those years in Jacksonville, I probably would have lost any sanity I had left. It was the diary that kept me together. I was stitched together loosely; a rag doll sewn with empty promises and heartache. It wasn’t until I

started to pull apart at the seams that I realized my life didn't have to be that way.

Jeremy tried to come back several times after I left Jacksonville, but it was too late. The girl he married was gone, buried under failed trust and broken glass.

As I move toward my new life, I'm happy. Jeremy is no longer the ghost haunting me day and night. I'm free from that bond. Besides, if it wasn't for that dark period, I wouldn't have made my way to Tabs, and that would be a tragedy.